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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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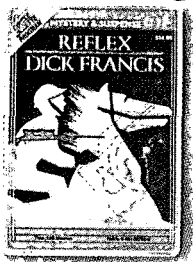
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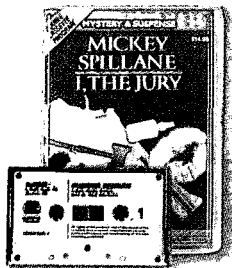
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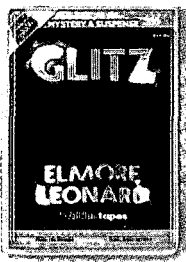
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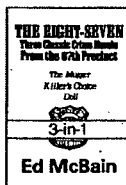
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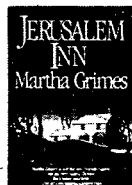
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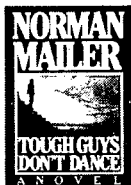
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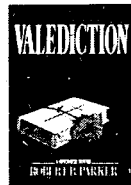
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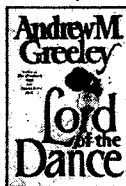
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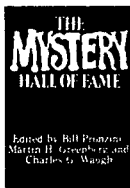
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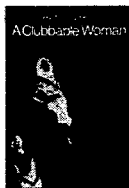
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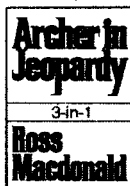
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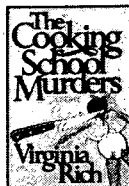
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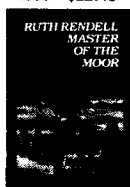
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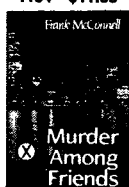
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WILLIAM BANKIER

The bus driver unlocked the luggage compartment and dragged out a smart blue suitcase and a rough brown one with a strap around it. He accepted a dollar from the girl and watched her as she humped the awkward pieces toward the front door of the Coronet Hotel. Here was somebody with a ticket to Toronto and she was choosing to stop in Baytown. Weird . . .

BAYTOWN'S GAIN

by WILLIAM BANKIER

We will be at least an hour here in Baytown," the bus driver said, and the passengers groaned with such disgust that Garney Miller grinned out on the pavement where he had parked his car beside the depot in the market square. "I have to get this cooling system looked at," the driver explained as he opened the door and let the stranded people climb down.

Miller surveyed the travelers. Most of them were the sort of cheap-pants-and-shirtsleeves types who ride on buses these days. But the girl in the mauve dress was different. She had a helmet of silver hair brushed low over eyes expertly done with liner and shadow. Her skirt revealed plenty of shiny nylon leg as she clambered down, and Miller was fascinated by the backless sandals she wore, which had high, transparent heels.

"You can get coffee and a sandwich inside," the driver concluded as he departed in search of a mechanic. His customers grumbled again but most of them filed toward the greasy glass door and the counter and stools beyond.

Miller couldn't take his eyes off the girl. She was, he decided, the most exciting thing to arrive in Baytown since the circus stopped

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touring. She was looking this way and that, a bulky shoulderbag tucked up under her arm, teetering slightly on those sexy legs, all helplessness and bewilderment. "Ah, mon Dieu," she murmured.

Miller went to her and said, "Listen, I don't recommend the depot. Come with me and I'll show you the Paragon Café."

She gave him the sort of smile they perform in movies. No stranger in real life had ever poured so much warmth over Garney Miller. "Merci, thank you." As they moved out of the market square, she took his arm. "I left in such a hurry, I had no breakfast."

Miller volunteered to have a coffee with her. He had half an hour before he was due at work. "I'm a waiter in the beverage room at the Coronet Hotel. Just down the street." Watching her eat, sharing the booth with her, he felt as breathless as if he was crossing a narrow plank between two roofs. Nobody else in Baytown, he told himself, would have spoken to the woman until she'd been around for at least six months and this dress had been washed a few times and gone drab. What about these clothes? Yes, she was dressed to attract attention, but why not? She was worth a second look. Women around here seemed to believe they had signed a contract to wear dull colors, shapeless garments. Peasants.

"Going to Toronto?"

"I suppose."

"You're not sure?"

"Toronto, maybe."

He sensed her anxiety. This pretty little animal was seething, looking for a way out of the trap.

"You're not going anywhere," he said. "You're leaving someplace."

She smiled ruefully. "Leaving Montreal. With my bad English, I'm leaving where they all speak French."

"You speak good English." He drank some coffee and then took half a slice of toast from her plate and bit into it. "We've all got our problems, eh?"

"Ah, c'est vrai."

"Yes, it's true. My wife went to Metralia eight months ago to look after her sick mother. But three months ago her mother died and Brenda is still there. She says she has to stay and see about selling the old house."

The girl paid professional attention to this story. When Miller had finished, she said, "She is crazy, your wife."

Garney began to feel he had run out of things to say. They would

be unstacking the chairs in the beverage room and he ought to be there. "Listen, I have to go. My name is Garney Miller."

"Nadine Charlot."

They shook hands formally. Miller reached for the check. "Let me pay for this, I brought you here."

"Non, non—" The girl rescued the little piece of paper and tucked it under her plate. "I have plenty of money," she said.

Nadine left the restaurant ten minutes after Miller. There was still half an hour before the bus would depart, assuming the engine had been repaired. She crossed the street and walked past an ornate building with a tall clock tower, moved through a narrow side street, and entered the market square. Some passengers were loitering outside the bus, a few had already climbed up and taken their seats. The driver was at the back, peering over another man's shoulder into the engine compartment.

"Escuzez-moi monsieur—"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Could you get out my bags, please? I am not going to Toronto."

The driver unlocked the luggage compartment and dragged out a smart blue suitcase and a rough brown one with a strap around it. He accepted a dollar from the girl and watched her as she humped the awkward pieces toward the front door of the Coronet Hotel. Here was somebody with a ticket to Toronto and she was choosing to stop in Baytown. Weird.

That evening, Miller was assigned to the men's beverage room. The place was half empty and the customers were drinking slowly. He had time to become absorbed in the baseball game on the TV screen above the bar. At ten o'clock, the waiter looking after the ladies' beverage room came through making faces. "You should see what I got in there. She has me so excited I can hardly get between the tables."

Half an hour later, Miller was persuaded to go through and have a look. He saw Nadine alone at a table by the door. She had changed into a black sheath with a bolero jacket in white with pink polka dots. She was wearing dark glasses and a broad-brimmed straw hat. Miller was as embarrassed as if his mother had appeared naked in church, but at the same time he was thrilled. Nobody knew this girl except him. And what was she doing here?

As he approached the table she saw him, took off her glasses;

smiled, and waved. She looked less intimidating without the glasses. "Hello, stranger," she said.

"Small world. How come you're back in town?"

"I never left. I decided to spend some time in Baytown."

He could put only one interpretation on that and his heart began to pound. "That's Baytown's gain. Where are you staying?"

"Right here." She produced a key from her bag and read the plastic tag. "Room 209."

"I'm through in an hour. Want something to eat?"

"Yes."

"This time, I pay." He struck his wrist sharply on the doorframe as he left the room but did not feel it.

When the beverage rooms closed, Miller shared in the swift clearing up, then collected Nadine from her table where she was waiting alone. As he left the bar, the other waiters made primitive noises. Outside, he walked her up the street and past the Paragon Café.

"Are we going somewhere else?"

"I thought I'd give you a taste of home cooking."

"I'd like that." Her hand tightened on his arm and their pace quickened.

The route was uphill, past a stone church set back behind a rolling, terraced lawn. Each house on the way occupied a large lot crowded with shrubs, small trees, flower beds. There was not much traffic. Their heels beat in time, crickets chirped, somebody coughed upstairs behind an open window.

"A quiet town," Nadine said. "I come from a quiet town."

"Montreal, quiet?"

"I was not born in Montreal. I am from Val David in the Laurentians."

He led her from the hill road onto a narrow street and toward a small cottage built close to the pavement. "Almost home."

She noticed the street sign. "You live on John Street?"

"Is that funny?"

"I like your house."

She sat at the kitchen table and watched him make a giant omelet full of onions and ham and green pepper. He turned it in the pan expertly, cut it in half, served her a plate with toast and coffee.

"This is good."

"You don't have to tell me your troubles if you don't want to. But I can see you're running away from something."

"You don't want to know. Better for you if you don't know about me."

"I know about you already. Everything that matters."

"Espèce de fou," she said. "You are crazy."

As he rinsed the plates at the sink, Miller said, "You don't have to go back to the hotel if you don't want to."

"I don't want to. But—" Nadine turned her hand over several times to indicate the ambivalence of her feelings.

"There's a room for you. My son Philip is away with friends. He's away a lot of the time. You can stay there tonight."

"Will he mind?"

"He won't even know. Nobody will know."

"That's what I need," she said.

He took her upstairs and showed her the room with its football photographs, pennants, and trophies. ("Phil's good. He quarter-backed Baytown High School to three Ontario titles. In the fall, he's off to Queen's University on a scholarship.") He found a spare dressing gown and a pair of pajamas for her. He sat on his own bed while she used the bathroom and changed. His trumpet lay on the pillow where he had placed it before going to work that afternoon. Had he been alone, he would now insert a mute and blow a few relaxing choruses of some jazz standard. These days he was concentrating on "What's New?"

She appeared in the doorway, looking childish with sleeves turned up and her face scrubbed clean of sophistication. "Well—" she said.

"Bon soir," he said. "Is that what you say?"

"A demain. Until tomorrow." About to turn away, she noticed the trumpet. "Are you a musician?"

"Not really. It's my hobby. I taught myself to play. Never had any lessons."

She came into the bedroom and sat beside him on the bed. "Play me something. A lullaby."

"I can't now, it's too loud. The neighbors would call the police."

"We don't want the police."

"If you can stick around tomorrow, I'll drive you to this place across the bay. It's deserted now—the Round Spot. I'll be able to play for you there. We can make it a picnic."

"I can stick around for that," she said.

He followed her to the doorway, and as she moved toward Philip's

room he put a hand on her shoulder, turned her, leaned forward. She shifted her face, took the kiss on a cheek. "Sleep well," he said.

In the morning, Miller smelled coffee. He went to the bathroom, then walked into the kitchen to find her sitting fully dressed, mug in hand, the newspaper spread open on the table. She was frowning at what she was reading. He caught a glimpse of the headline before she folded the paper and shoved it aside. "Did you sleep okay?"

"You're up early."

"It is so quiet here. I'm not used to the silence."

He unfolded the paper, noted the story that had her worried—"Montreal Police Link Cresswell Killing To Securiteam Robbery. Search On For Stewart Pye, Brother Of Jailed Edward Pye, Known To Be Leader Of Gang. Still No Sign Of Million Dollars Stolen From Company Vault."

"Dangerous stuff in your part of the world," Miller said. He waited for her to respond. When she remained silent, he said, "Have you had anything to eat?"

"I can't eat in the morning."

The front door opened and closed. "Anybody home?" The voice was resonant, coarse, careless, and belligerent. Philip Miller walked into the kitchen, taller than his father, tanned, crewcut, the same parental blue eyes but made narrow by high cheekbones. He stared at the strange woman, observing her short black dress, the stockings, the flamboyant shoes, the detailed makeup at eight-thirty in the morning. "Sorry, Father." There was no respect in the formal address. "Am I interrupting something?"

"This is Nadine Charlot. My son, Philip."

The boy went to the refrigerator, took out a quart of milk, tore off the cap, and drank from the bottle. Nadine watched the movements of his throat. Miller sat down. "I'm parched," the boy said, lowering the bottle half empty. "Well, Mademoiselle," he asked her, "are you coming or going? Excuse the expression."

"It was late—Garney asked me to stay."

"Garney is a hospitable guy." Philip drank again. "Mother telephoned last night before I went out. She's invited me to come over to Metralia—stay with her till I have to report to Queen's."

"Sounds good," Garney said. "You'll like that."

"Hell of a lot better than rotting around here." He recapped the bottle. "Mind you, things are looking up. The management seems to have relaxed its puritanical regulations."

Nadine's color deepened and she studied a set of immaculate fingernails.

"We're driving over to the Round Spot this morning."

"Are you still dreaming about that place? Forget it, Father, those things only happen in Judy Garland movies." The boy put the milk bottle away and went to stand in the doorway. "I'm going to crash," he said. "No sleep at Bonnie's place last night."

Miller followed his son to the stairway. "You were very rude," he whispered.

"She's heard worse."

"In my house, with my guest, you can use the manners you were taught."

The boy hung his face close to his father's and smiled without humor. "If you want to bring a hooker in here, that's your business. But I don't have to be polite to her." He stumped up the stairs.

His own naiveté surprised Miller. Only now was he recognizing what his son had spotted instantly. Nadine Charlot was a professional. Of course she was. Strange that he had seen her merely as a pretty French-Canadian dressed in extravagant clothes.

Back in the kitchen, he found her at the window looking out. He went to stand behind her. "Sun's burning through the mist," he said. "Another great day. I can make us some sandwiches or we can eat at a drive-in. Maybe the drive-in is better. I'll go and shave and we can head across the bay. I'll bring my trumpet."

She turned her head and gave him a sympathetic smile across her shoulder. "Now you see me through his eyes."

"He's a rude bastard."

"I'm frightened, Garney."

"I know."

"That story in the paper. The murder. I can't tell you about it—but I'm involved."

"Tell me when you're ready."

"Baytown is remote, but not forever. They'll trace me. When they do, the hotel is not the safest place."

"You'll come and stay here. We'll check you out when we come back from the Round Spot. Nobody will find you on John Street." He made the connection, knew why she had smiled last night at the street sign.

"Yes," she confirmed. "We call them Johns."

They walked to the market square where Miller had left his car

parked last night. He let her in, got behind the wheel, and drove across the Bay Bridge with choppy blue water under it, then onto the gradually rising ground of the orchard country on the other side. A mile up the road, they arrived at a gravel parking area, deserted, with a derelict roadhouse of shabby frame construction built in a roughly circular shape. "It would need a lot of work," Miller said as he opened the passenger door and assisted Nadine from the car.

He knew a way inside through a broken panel beside one of the windows. "Don't catch your dress on that nail."

Sunlight through dirty windows gave an effect of subdued stage lighting. They stood on what had been a small dance floor and surveyed the counter with its row of stools, the littered space for tables and chairs, broken railings, broken mirrors, loose wires hanging from the ceiling where lighting fixtures had been.

"This is my dream, Nadine."

"Tell me."

"I'd have this place renovated but not made any bigger. This is the right size. I'd import jazz groups from the States, people like Stan Getz, Miles Davis—the great ones who are still playing. And I'd back them with a small group of my own. The Round Spot would become the main place between Toronto and Montreal."

"I think it's a good idea."

"But it would cost a ton of money. More than I'll ever be able to save or borrow."

"You can never tell," Nadine said. "The money may show up from somewhere."

As they were about to leave, she reminded him that he had promised to play for her. His instrument was in the car. Miller looked around the haunted room. "Why not? Don't go away."

He edged out through the broken wall, ran to the car, and was back in seconds with his trumpet case. "Don't expect too much," he said as he fitted mouthpiece to horn. "Remember, I'm self-taught." He blew a few warm-up phrases, then started to play his current favorite, "What's New?" He went through the poignant melody once at a slow, free tempo, then picked up the pace and began putting in a few licks. After a minute or so, he forgot about his audience, lost himself in the music, and let it flow.

Nadine knew from the start that Miller wasn't very good. She had spent plenty of time in Montreal jazz clubs listening to men who knew their way around their instruments. This was mediocre stuff, the tone uncertain, sometimes out of tune. And when he began

playing fast and putting in his own ideas, they didn't fit. Tapping time, she kept having to let a bar go when his phrase lasted longer than the correct number of beats. She wasn't embarrassed—it was a feeling deeper than that. It was as if she were the mother of a child who sang eagerly but badly. She felt a strong urge to protect him. His glazed eyes were fixed on an invisible point in space and Nadine realized that he was hearing better music than he was able to play.

When he finished, she said, "Fantastic."

He wiped his lips, wiped his eyes. He was breathing hard and grinning like the man who won the marathon. "It's what I want to do. I wasn't born to serve beer in a tavern."

They left the Round Spot and drove to a diner where they consumed hamburgers and fries and milk-shakes. Miller sounded relaxed and in control. "We finish here," he said, "then over to the hotel to get your things. Then up to the house, where you'll move in as my guest for as long as you like."

She looked half pleased, half troubled. "Philip is not going to like that." In her mind was a disconcerting image of the young man standing in the kitchen, staring at her, threatening her in some way.

"One of two things. Most of the time, Philip is at the home of his girl friend, Bonnie Brill. If so, no problem. But if he happens to be at home and using his room, there's a spare room where Brenda does her sewing. There's a couch in there we can make up into a bed." He grinned at her. "Unless you'd prefer to sleep in a proper double bed with yours truly."

She handled it by matching his jocular tone. "My friend, you will be the first to know." As they laughed together, she saw his kiss coming, turned her face, and took it on the cheek.

Miller insisted on carrying both of her bags from the car to the house. The battered old brown one bound in straps was the heavier. Inside, he lugged the suitcases upstairs and slung them onto the floor in the sewing room. He stood for a moment looking at the covered machine, saw in his mind's eye Brenda bending over her work, heard the needle buzzing through the fabric, felt her capable presence in the room. He missed his wife. All was not well between them, they had been drifting apart, but now that she was gone there was a large, ragged hole in his existence. And who was going to mend it?

He heard voices coming from the kitchen. So Phil was still home.

He hurried down the stairs and joined them as his son was opening a couple of tins of beer, serving one to Nadine with a courtly flourish. "My old man hustles beer for a living," he said. "But you could die of thirst around here."

"I've put your stuff in the sewing room," Miller said. He looked at Philip. "You don't have to worry about anybody using your bed."

The young man raised his glass. "Nadine can sleep in my bed any time she likes."

"Your son is a wicked man."

"Try me."

Nadine turned away from him to Garney. "That old place—the Round Spot? I think the plan is very good."

"One of these days, maybe."

"When your millionaire uncle dies and leaves you a fortune," Philip said.

"The money could happen," Nadine hinted. "You never know."

Philip said he was going to wander over and see Bonnie Brill—they had been talking about driving to Kingston to have a look at the university campus. He didn't know if he'd be back to eat. He wasn't even sure they'd go to Kingston. Setting a plan of action and sticking to it was anathema to Philip and his friends.

When he was alone again with Nadine, Miller said, "You keep saying the money I need may show up. Do you know something I don't know?"

She looked at him for a long time in silence. Then she said, "Yes." She got up and left the room, saying, "I want to show you something. Come on."

Upstairs, she hefted the old brown suitcase onto the settee in the sewing room and unhooked the straps. With a key taken from her purse, she unfastened the lock. When she opened the lid and drew away a couple of wads of newspaper, Miller was hardly surprised to see the money—rows of bundles of used banknotes. Fives, tens, twenties—

"This is it," he said. The story she had been reading in the newspaper flashed into his mind. "The missing loot from the Securiteam robbery."

"Edward Pye is my friend," she said. "He was behind the robbery but he was arrested. His brother, Stewie Pye, was coming to pick up the money but I took it and ran. I'm not sure what I was thinking of."

"Talk about living dangerously."

"Maybe I meant to hide it and keep it for Edward when he gets out of prison. Or maybe I just wanted to stop doing what I do to live. I thought I could be free if I could just get away somewhere. But not with Stewie Pye coming after me."

"The report said he killed a man."

"Cresswell. I told Cresswell what I was doing. I'm not sure whether he opened up before he was murdered. If he did, Stewie knows how to start tracing me."

"They'll never find you here."

"You don't know them." Nadine sat facing the open suitcase. She ran the palms of her hands over the packs of money. Miller had seen Brenda smooth baby Philip's blanket in this way many years ago. She looked up at him. "How much do you need?"

"What?"

"To fix up the Round Spot. How much money?"

"Forget it. You can't do that."

"Whatever happens after this, at least I will know something good came out of it." She took up several packs of banknotes, stood, and pressed them against his chest. "You are such a good man, Garney. Take the money, and be happy."

Miller heard a sound outside the sewing room. He went out onto the landing and saw his son disappearing into his bedroom. He went there and stood over the boy, who was making an elaborate show out of reclining. "Did you hear all that?"

"Enough."

"You're going to keep quiet about it."

"I could use a few thousand. A college boy has expenses."

"Mind your own business."

The boy looked up with an expression of injured innocence. "A law-abiding citizen like me? I consider it my business when I learn something about a crime to get in touch with the police."

Miller knotted his tie and slipped into his jacket, enjoying the boring business of getting dressed to go to work because Nadine was watching him. It had been three days since Philip's threatening declaration and they were beginning to settle down. "If he'd told the cops, they'd have been here by now. He was bluffing. I know my son."

"But where has he gone?"

"He's with the Bonnie Brill character. Those two are like a couple

of wild birds. They're here for a week and then they take off. I'll be glad when he's in university with a football schedule to tie him down."

"Maybe we can go and watch him play." She looked wistful.

He gave her a sarcastic smile. "You wouldn't enjoy it," he said. "The handsome head is buried inside a helmet."

When Miller had departed for the hotel, Nadine did as she was told and stayed inside the house. The garden was on limits—she was able to go out there and sit on the big swing surrounded by beds of purple and yellow iris, watching a small bird entering and leaving a miniature house fastened high on a pole—but her access to John Street was the view from behind the curtains on the front window.

She was peering out in the late afternoon when she saw the black car approaching from the corner by the church. It was its slow rate of speed that was alarming. Hearses travel at this menacing crawl. Nadine drew back but kept her eyes on the front seat of the car. As it passed the house, she saw the driver, half recognized him for a Montreal character, and had no doubt whatever about the identity of the man in the passenger seat. Stewie Pye. The hat, the shoulders.

Something inside the young woman took over. As soon as she saw the car out of sight, she went to the telephone and ordered a taxi, using the number on a card pinned to the wall. Then she went upstairs and packed. By the time she was downstairs again with both bags, the cab was outside. Five minutes later, she was in the Coronet Hotel beverage room, catching Garney's eye.

"I saw Stewie Pye drive past the house. He's found me."

"You sure it was him?"

"Philip must have gone to Montreal. He must have told them."

Miller whipped off his apron and stowed it behind the bar while he spoke to the bartender. He got into his jacket and escorted Nadine outside to the waiting taxi. As he unloaded the suitcases, she paid off the driver. Then he carried the bags down a brick-paved laneway to a parking area behind the hotel.

"Where are we going?"

"Metralia."

"Your wife?"

"You know a better place?"

Nadine said nothing, got into the front seat beside him, and made herself small as they rolled out of the laneway in Miller's old car, turned onto Front Street, and headed for the Metralia highway.

As they left Baytown and picked up speed on the open road, she

said, "What will your wife think about you bringing me to her home?"

"She'll understand," he said. "She isn't a monster, she just got tired of living with me."

"What will you tell her?"

"The truth. Same as always."

The Metralia house, home of Brenda's late mother, was much larger than Garney Miller's place in Baytown. Nadine observed the pillars on the broad porch, the deep lawn, the fully grown trees framing walls of brick and stone, and decided that the woman had come down in the world when she married hard-working, untalented Garney.

Alerted by her husband's telephone call, Brenda was at the door as they got out of the car and approached up a gravel path, carrying one bag each.

"You're a lifesaver, Bren," he said.

"Come in. Are you hungry?"

"A drink would be in order. Drink, Nadine?"

Brenda Miller was a larger woman than Nadine had expected to see—not fat but with solid limbs and a bulky torso. She wore tailored jeans and a T-shirt, her sandy hair glossily styled around her plump, open face. She might have been a discus thrower on the Olympic team from a northern country. "Dump the bags, sit down, and relax. I was having rye-and-ginger, okay?"

While she made the drinks, Garney explained in detail what was going on, leaving nothing out, covering the robbery, Nadine's escape with the money, the pursuit of the man Pye, and ending with the gangster's appearance in Baytown, making a reconnaissance down John Street.

Brenda handed a glass to Nadine and one to her husband, then sat beside him on the sofa. "I can't leave you alone for a minute," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder and shaking him gently like a loved, troublesome child.

"I won't stay here long," Nadine said. "If he found me in Baytown, he can trace me here."

Brenda's face took on a practical expression. "Couldn't you give back the money? Get off the hook that way?"

"They'd fix me. I've caused them a lot of trouble. Besides, all my life I've been on the short end." Nadine finished her drink, felt the alcohol making her aggressive. "You'll understand me, Brenda,

you're a woman. For years I've had to kiss so many bastards to make a living. Now I can put that behind me."

Miller resented what Nadine was saying. "We're not all as bad as that," he said.

"You're a man," she told him. "You wouldn't understand."

"My friend Luke is coming by later," Brenda said. She made no attempt to hide from her husband the fact that she was seeing somebody. "He has a cottage at Cedar Lake where you could stay. Do you mind if we bring Luke in on this?"

"Do you mind, Nadine?" Miller asked.

"What's the difference? I'm never getting out of this anyway." She raised her shoulders. "Let's try it—why not?"

The telephone rang and Brenda answered. "Philip! Yes, he is, dear. They both are."

"I drove to Montreal with Bonnie." The boy's voice on the phone sounded drunk. "It was easy to make contact. We went into this bar and told the bartender we knew where the missing loot was from the robbery. In half an hour, these guys came in and talked to us. I gave them our address."

Brenda said sharply, "You told thugs like that where we live?"

"To get rid of the hooker. He brought her into our home, Mom. She was living here."

"You had no business, Philip."

"Listen," he said, "you haven't much time. When they found she'd left Baytown, they cornered me. I had to tell them where I thought he took her. The only place I could think of was Metralia."

"You gave them this address?"

"I had to. You'll be all right, Mom. They only want the money, and the girl."

When Brenda put down the telephone, Nadine said, "We can't stay here now."

"I'll ring Luke—he can take you to the cottage."

Miller said briskly, "No. That won't work. If they show up here and we've gone, they'll start in on you, Bren." He got up and went into the kitchen. "Showdown time," he said.

"I think I know what he has in mind," Brenda said grimly.

"He can't take these people on," Nadine said. "He doesn't know them."

Miller returned carrying a pistol. "Your mother's old gun, to keep off intruders in the night." He inspected the chamber. "I hope it still works."

"Garney, this is crazy."

"They won't expect me to fight them. That will be my trump card." He peered out through the front window. The trees on the lawn had become silhouettes against a sky drained of light. "Make us another drink, Bren."

"You'd better listen to Nadine, my dear."

"There are only two of them," Miller said. "They'll never know what hit them."

"Even if you kill these two," Nadine said, "others will come. They'll never give up."

Miller winked at her. "Leave it to me, *chérie*."

Nadine held out her hand and when he reached out and took it, she drew him closer, stood up, and kissed him gently on the lips. He expressed exaggerated surprise.

"One for our side," he said.

"I think I'll just call the police." Brenda crossed the room.

Miller moved quickly to the telephone, ripped the wire from the wall.

"For once," he complained, "let me do something *my way*."

"I don't understand you."

"You never did. I'm turning my life around, sweetie. For a week now I haven't been bored and I love it. Nadine and I are going to renovate the Round Spot. Remember how you scorned that idea? You never thought I could be a professional musician. Come around in a year and see the way I've changed."

"You've changed all right," Brenda said. "You've gone around the bend."

At the window, Miller stiffened.

"Big black car. Here they come. Yes, they're slowing—stopping. Guy in a hat getting out." He moved into the vestibule, the gun in his hand.

Nadine went to Brenda and whispered, "Is there a side door?" The two of them picked up a suitcase each and left the room.

The knock on the door sounded polite. Miller opened the door and confronted the heavy-set man standing in shadow.

"Your name Miller?"

"Yes, and you'd better get your ass out of here." Miller lifted the gun and pointed it into the man's face.

Stewart Pye raised his hands. "Okay! Cool it." He laughed. "She must have really got to you."

"Get back in the car and drive away." Miller felt he ought to kill this man quickly and go after the other, but now, having inherited the moment, he was unable to pull the trigger.

"You can't win. We know where you are."

"Go."

Shaking his head, laughing to himself, Pye walked back along the gravel path to the car and spoke in through the driver's window. Suddenly there was movement at the side of the house. Nadine and Brenda came running, carrying the suitcases. They were at the car before Miller could react. He heard Nadine yelling, "Stewie, I'm coming back! The money is here! I'm coming back!"

As the gangster opened the back door of the car, threw in the bags, and thrust Nadine in after them, Miller's paralysis dissolved and he ran down the path. Pye slammed the back door behind Nadine, rounded the car which was beginning to crawl, and jumped into the front seat.

They were away, leaving Brenda staring after them.

Miller was screaming, "Bastards! Bastards!" He raised the gun, held it in both hands, arms stiff at shoulder level, knees bent, exactly the way he had seen it done on television, and fired once, twice. He thought he heard glass shattering through the sound of tires scorching pavement.

Brenda caught his arm and pulled the gun down. "You really have gone crazy."

The police came to the house an hour later. The speeding car with its rear window shattered had been pursued and stopped on the highway a mile out of town. Phone calls from neighbors had reported gunfire outside the big house and a car racing away. It wasn't difficult to connect the two events.

"Would you like to tell us what's been happening?" the investigating officer said.

"You found the money in the suitcase?"

"Yes. We believe it must be the missing cash from the Securiteam robbery in Montreal."

"Right." Miller took another sip of his latest drink. "Here's the gun I used."

He handed it over. "Maybe they'll pay me a reward when they get their money back."

"I don't think so," the policeman said. "We found a dead woman in the back seat of the car. Shot through the back of the head. If

this turns out to be the weapon that killed her, you're in some kind of trouble."

On the way to the Metralia police station, Miller had time to think. A short term in prison with time off for good behavior would be an improvement on his current life sentence serving beer. Then he would come out, take Nadine's gift of cash, and start renovating the Round Spot. His dream would become a reality—Garney Miller on the bandstand showing the world what a hot musician they had been ignoring for all these years.

"Q"

DETECTIVER SE

WHO KILLED MAJOR BOBBIN?

by ALICE RUDOSKI

"Not I," said the maid, with a dimpled smile.
"I was counting the silver—that takes a while."

"Not I," said the butler, with haughty stare.
"I was shining the gems in the Master's chair."

"Not I," said the chauffeur, with trembling voice.
"I was dusting the dash on the new Rolls-Royce."

There wasn't a clue to be found in the place,
So the file was closed on the unsolved case.
"It's the perfect crime, I can plainly see,"
Said Inspector Bobbin, the heir-to-be.

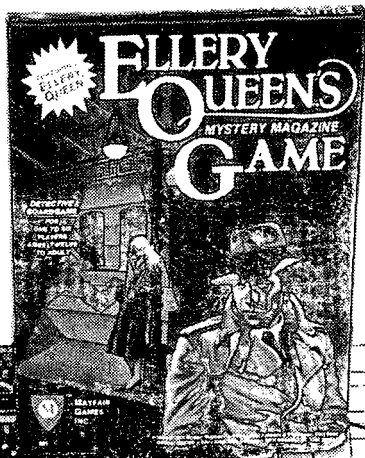
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MURDER? THEFT? BLACKMAIL? EMBEZZLEMENT?

WHO? WHY? WHERE? HOW?

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a **NEW Sweeney story** by

J. L. POUVOIR

Sweeney was in Prague for the World Ice Hockey Championships.

Ilyich had been a fixture on the Soviet select team since 1970. Four times an Olympian, veteran of every major championship, a defenseman with nearly three hundred international matches behind him. "And," the concierge at the Jalta told Sweeney, "he was here in 1968."

"For the invasion," Sweeney realized.

"The Great Befriendment," the concierge said. "That is what Moscow called it . . ."

THE GREAT BEFRIENDMENT

by J. L. POUVOIR

Sweeney was pleased he'd packed the tweeds. Back in Baltimore, the Orioles had been thwacking baseballs into warmish April air for three weeks. Here in Prague, where the wind still whistled fiercely off the Vltava, a man wanted wool, buttons, and carbohydrates to burn.

The calendar might read spring, but the bones said winter. As it should be, thought Sweeney as he ambled toward the main ice hall. The seasons obey their own rhythms. Vivaldi knew that.

These were the World Ice Hockey Championships, after all, and mood was important to the ritual Sweeney had observed for thirty years. Late April meant two weeks inside a semi-frigid European sporting hall, watching Russians and Czechs, Canadians and Swedes, Finns and Americans swirl and swoop and thump each other for sixty minutes at a time while up above, in a seat placed just below the rafters, perched Sweeney, filling legal pads with his ob-

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scure runic scribble and nipping cognac from a silver flask. If the Americans accomplished anything noteworthy, Sweeney was under vague instruction to compose a brief newspaper account for the *Noc-turne* with as much concise yet compelling detail as he could muster.

This happened rarely, so Sweeney passed most of his fortnight untroubled, and instead savored the passion plays—the Czechs versus the Russians, the East Side Germans versus the West Side Germans, the Italians (on the rare occasions when they qualified) versus anyone. But for psychodramas, for continental subplots, for European blood feuds that took you back centuries, you couldn't be disappointed at the hockey Worlds. For concelebrants, Sweeney and fellow journalists from The Bloc—Hasek from Prague's *Rude Pravo*, Vasiliev from *Sovietski Sport*, Lasek from Warsaw.

Most Western sportswriters didn't bother with the Worlds. The Americans and Canadians usually sent patchwork clubs that were readily chewed up by the Russians and Czechs. So who cared in Cleveland or Calgary? Tonight, you're sole witness for the hemisphere, Sweeney told himself as he passed through winding old streets on his way to see the Soviet Union play Sweden in their semifinal.

Ten minutes later, he was fishing in his tweeds for his press ticket and elbowing his way upstairs, where he found Lasek installed next to a vacant seat.

"Ah, Swjnj," Lasek said. "You are well?"

"As always, old buddy. And you look mahvelous. Martial law must gree with you."

Lasek shrugged.

"My belly notices no change. Certainly not for the better. Yes, we ave no bananas. What else is new in Poland?"

"And what else is new down there?" said Sweeney, pointing to enter ice. "The Russians ruling, everybody else consigned to the roletariat."

"We hope, of course, for the Czechs," said Lasek. "Here in Prague, who knows? They have done it before. If the Russian bear can be armed even for one evening, the people will dance in the streets. In my city, too."

Sweeney nodded. "As always."

The Swedes began filing through the wooden gate and coming into the playing surface now, a rising roar greeting each one. The vague audience could barely tell an Eriksson from an Andersson,

but that mattered little. Somebody was going up against Russians and that was enough.

Moments later, twenty players in scarlet appeared and the stands fell silent. When Igor Larionov, the Soviets' best center, stepped onto the ice, you could hear his skate blades scraping thirty rows up.

Poor buggers, Sweeney thought. They can play from Berlin to Bucharest and never hear two hands clapping. So much for empire building.

Impassively, the Soviets cruised in long, lazy loops, the same faces who'd been taking the ice for five years. Krutov. Makarov. Skvortsov. Fetisov. Ilyich— No Ilyich.

"Where's Ilyich?" Sweeney murmured.

"Unavoidably detained," Lasek offered. "Missed the tram. Still sleeping. Various indisposed. Indescribably dyspeptic. This is no unusual for Ilyich."

The man had been a fixture on the Soviet select team since 1970. Four times an Olympian, veteran of every major championship, a defenseman with nearly three hundred international matches behind him.

Ilyich was thirty-seven now, and trusted by the authorities. Consequently, he could go virtually anywhere he pleased without being tailed by a KGB agent. Usually that meant shopping for jewelry, electronic gear, and leather goods, which Ilyich sold for obscene profits back in Moscow. Or a quick dalliance with one of any number of women who admired his bearing, which resembled a Cossack horseman's.

He would turn up late for games and coaches would discipline him, leaving him off the team for meaningless club championships. But Ilyich was always on the team when it mattered.

"They won't miss him," Lasek predicted as the first period became the second with the Russians leading by three goals. "They've got plenty of horses in the stable. Fetisov, Pervukhin, Kasatanov—"

"Never ends, does it?" Sweeney said. "One retires, another move in. Interchangeable parts, interchangeable names. They're all Vladimir or Vyacheslav or Vladislav or Valery. And they all skate like hell."

The Russians liked quiet arenas when they went on the road, with everyone sitting awed or bored or both. Before long, they had one. It was 6-0, then 9-1, and then it was done. Sweeney wandered downstairs to the interview room for the post-mortem.

After a while, his Warsaw counterpart joined him. "I overhear Vasiliev talking to his comrade on *Izvestia*," Lasek whispered. "They say Ilyich is dead."

"First time he's used that excuse," Sweeney muttered.

"No, no, I am being frank. They find him lying in the street outside the hotel Jalta on Wenceslaus Square. He comes out of the window."

"Jumped or fell, as they say in my newspaper," Sweeney said.

"Over here," Lasek smiled, "they say 'died trying to escape.'"

The Soviet coach was approaching the microphone now, explaining his tactics, praising the Swedes for their persistence, saying that no opponent could be approached lightly.

"Ilyich!" Sweeney called out. "Where was he?"

"Ilyich," the interpreter said. "*Gdyeh bil?*"

"At hotel," the coach replied, his expression unchanged. "With stomach problem."

At the very least, Sweeney thought.

The press conference soon petered out amid a flurry of technical questions about strategy for the final with the Czechs. Sweeney yawned, capped his fountain pen, and turned to Lasek. "Dinner, my friend?"

They suppered heavily—in Prague, one can supper no other way—on roast pork, sauerkraut, dumplings, and dark ale at U Tonaše, a Fourteenth Century restaurant founded by Augustinian monks.

"What do you make of all this, old buddy?" wondered Sweeney, coming up briefly for air.

"*Could* be suicide," Lasek conceded. "This is said to be Ilyich's final season, his last international tournament. A sad farewell to the black market he loves so well."

"But you doubt it?"

"My Czech friends are saying a Russian is responsible. Perhaps the KGB. The KGB is under suspicion at all times in all places."

"The Russians, no doubt, will say it was a Czech."

"Of course," Lasek grinned. "That narrows the possibilities to one million suspects in this city."

"Easier to trace a Russian," nodded Sweeney. "Particularly one who wasn't there."

"Gusev."

"He missed the game, too. Had a sprained ankle, they say."

"And a motive," Lasek said. "As long as Ilyich is on the team,

Gusev must wait for a position in the regular rotation. And Gusev is not a patient man."

Sweeney took a long swallow of ale. "After ten years as under study, perhaps Gusev loses patience."

"Understudy on two teams," Lasek reminded him. "Ilyich plays ahead of Gusev on the Central Army club in Moscow. They go abroad with the Soviet national team and he does the same."

Sweeney cleaned his plate, selected enough crowns from his wallet to cover the bill, and reached for his overcoat. "Perhaps we should pursue this matter in the morning, my friend. At the ice hall."

"As you wish," Lasek agreed.

"You know some of the workers there, I understand."

"As brothers in socialism, of course. We speak the same language—or reasonably so. Polish, Russian, Czech—there is not so much difference. The word is the same for beer, for example. *Pivo*. The essential things we understand."

"Obligated," said Sweeney, stepping into the midnight chill and heading for the river. He took a different route this time, walking along the Charles Bridge with its statues of thirty saints, past the Old Town Hall and its ancient zodiac clock, and finally into Wenceslaus Square, where the good prince himself still stood sentry astride his horse.

Except for the night concierge, the Jalta's lobby was deserted.

"Evening, Jiri."

"You saw the hockey match, my American friend?"

"Nine-one. As always. And you saw Ilyich?"

Jiri glanced quickly around the lobby. "When the Russians are here," he whispered, "the walls grow ears. The police have a suspect."

"Admirable celerity," Sweeney said. "The poor soul might even have had something to do with it. Who?"

"A known hooligan, they say. He is shouting at the Russian players every day, saying they are doomed, that the Czechs will be murdering them in the tournament. He shouts especially at Ilyich."

"Why Ilyich?"

"As symbol. For fifteen years he plays on Soviet team. And he was here in 1968."

"Of course," Sweeney realized. "For the invasion."

"The Great Befriending. That is what Moscow called it. Ilyich was a lieutenant in their Army at that time, before he was chosen for the club team. For this reason, the authorities leave Ilyich on their team whenever they play here for many years. But people don't

ot forget. When the Russian players leave the hotel this evening climb upon their bus, this 'hooligan' shouts still. This time it is, Where is Ilyich? Where is Ilyich?" So he is the first man the police are looking for."

"You saw Ilyich during the day, Jiri?"

"He is in, then out, in, then out. Most Russians, they do not leave their room. If they do, they are walking with two others. But Ilyich, goes his own way. Today I see him with blonde woman. And the black-market man."

"You know their names?"

"Blonde women need no names. The black-market man is called Svoboda. You can see him here. Anywhere there are Westerners."

"Obligated, old buddy."

At the ice hall the next morning, Sweeney and Lasek broke in on a normal work day in The Bloc—one man repairing the ice-surfacing machine and three watching. Lasek spoke a few words Czech. The workers exchanged sidelong glances, then one spoke for four.

"They say Ilyich and Gusev had an argument at the end of their practice the day before last," Lasek told Sweeney. "That Gusev called Ilyich a *starik*. An old man. He said that Ilyich was in Prague only for a shop, to purchase the *defitsitny* goods, those which are unavailable in Moscow. That he was taking up a place on the team. They say Gusev and Ilyich had to be separated by their comrades."

Lasek looked at the workers, who were trying to suppress smiles. They say it is a shame that one Ivan did not kill the other."

"No way to speak of socialist brethren," Sweeney observed. "Tell me, my friend, you were here for The Great Befriending, were you not?"

"I was. There was a soccer match. Nobody expected the Russians to drop by."

"You know any Praguers who have a good memory?"

"One in particular."

"Magnificent," Sweeney concluded. "We must see him tonight."

"Should not be a problem," Lasek guessed. "He never sleeps when the Russians, any Russians, are in town."

Back at the Jalta, a slightly built middle-aged man nervously proached Sweeney as he boarded the elevator for the third floor. This one seems a little too eager, a little too furtive, thought Sweeney. Must be Svoboda.

"You have American dollars?"

"Perhaps," Sweeney said softly. "I want a Soviet hockey sweater
Svoboda nodded. "One thousand."

"I want number five," Sweeney told him. "Ilyich's."

"This is impossible."

"You mean he wouldn't sell it to you?"

"I do not understand."

"You saw him yesterday. I know this."

Svoboda shook his head vigorously. "No, no. I had nothing I
wanted. He had nothing I wanted."

"You realize he's dead?"

"The police have their man."

"The police have a man. They will certainly accept a substitute

"What do you want from me?"

"I know you saw him."

"So do many others. Jiri, the concierge. Gusev, his roommate. The
blonde woman."

"How do you know Gusev was his roommate?"

"I sell to them. Gusev—he buys, too. Why do you not speak
Gusev?"

"What can Gusev do for me?"

"He has Ilyich sweater, I am sure. That is what you want?"

"Of course," Sweeney said.

They were out of the elevator and halfway down the third-floor
corridor when Svoboda nodded abruptly and vanished around a corner. Curious profession, Sweeney decided, and entered his room.

The view from his window across a lightly traveled side street
was blocked by an imposing stone building, but the room was considerably less noisy than those that fronted on Wenceslaus Square. The Russian hockey team was quartered one floor above.

Considerably less public on this side, mused Sweeney. Which
probably just the way their officials like it. Ilyich's murderer must have minded, either.

It was a fine room for working, napping, or both. Sweeney checked
his watch, figured he had three hours before he had to meet Lasek and promptly retired.

At four, he rose briskly, refilled his fountain pen, slipped a fresh
legal pad into his scarred leather portfolio, and went down to the lobby.

"So who is your Czech friend?"

"Cernik," Lasek replied. "He was broadcaster. He has considerable memory. Cernik was on air when the Russians come in for the invasion. He tells the truth, that it is no befriending, that it is repression of Prague Spring. When the Russians seize the radio station, he takes to the street for five days, permitting himself no sleep. He takes photographs, he records everything. As you know, my friend, the only history one has here is what one sees himself. Nothing else is reliable. Nothing else endures."

As they passed the National Theatre and prepared to cross the Vltava by the May 1st Bridge, both men buttoned their overcoats and turned their collars to the rising wind.

"What do you think," Lasek asked as they made for Mala Strana, the Lesser Quarter, with its red rooftops, pleasant gardens, and narrow streets. "Is it Gusev?"

"No," Sweeney said. "A Czech."

"Why do you think this?"

"History. How did Ilyich die?"

"The window."

"Defenestration," Sweeney said.

Lasek arched his eyebrows. "You understand much."

They stopped in front of an old gabled housefront near the Kinsky Gardens and climbed a worn limestone staircase to the second floor, where Lasek rapped softly on a door.

After several minutes, the door was opened perhaps an inch. Lasek, the Pole muttered. A square face, half hidden by a thick moustache, appeared. A hand pulled the door ajar, motioned the visitors inside, then quickly pushed the door shut and bolted it.

"My friend Swjnj," Lasek said. "The American." Cernik extended an enormous hand.

"You come to talk about Ilyich?"

"And the Russians," Sweeney affirmed.

"The bastards," Cernik growled. "Now. Then. Always." Within moments, three cold bottles of Pilsner were produced. From a locked chest, Cernik lifted four fat albums of black-and-white photographs.

"Prague Spring," he said. "For five months, we have an intellectual freedom as Czechoslovakia has not known since before the war. We can speak freely, hold political meetings, write as we please. Dubcek calls it 'socialism with a human face,' and for the first time we feel there is hope. Until August. The Soviet planes arrive at Ruzyně Airport before dawn. The troops and tanks cross our borders everywhere. Our Army is told to stay in its barracks. It is, after all,

a befriending. In the morning, their tanks line Wenceslaus Square. Our people fill the streets, shouting at their soldiers. "Why are you here?" we say. "Why are you here?"

Cernik turned the pages slowly. A dozen numbered Soviet tanks lining a street in the Old Town, each manned with a stern-faced Russian officer. Hundreds of Praguers shouting at a Russian lieutenant, who has turned his face away. A Czech teenager trying to disable a tank with his bare hands.

Cernik stopped at one stark picture, where a young blonde girl knelt weeping over a dead twelve-year-old boy. "This you may remember," he said. "The boy tried to put the Czech tricolor down the barrel of a tank. The Russian lieutenant shoots him without saying a word."

Cernik turned the page and pointed to a stony young officer with the bearing of a Cossack horseman. "There he is. Murderer."

"Ilyich," Sweeney realized.

"He takes the boy's life without even changing his expression. Now you know why we cannot forget."

"The boy's name?"

"Novy. Petr Novy. A schoolchild."

"And the girl?"

"His younger sister. Vera."

"You are most kind to do this," Sweeney said, reaching for his coat. "Obligated."

"The obligation," said Cernik, "is mine."

The clock at the Old Town Hall was striking six as Sweeney plodded back to the Jalta. "See you in the morning, old buddy," he told Lasek. "I should know something reasonably definitive by then."

"Ah, America," Lasek chuckled. "Last refuge of the optimist."

By the time Sweeney had dined on Prague ham, roast duck, and a cucumber salad, it was after eight and Jiri was on duty at the hotel.

"A word with you, old buddy?"

"You have learned something?"

Sweeney smiled. "I have learned most things. I must learn one thing. The blonde woman—does she have a name?"

"Like most of us, I suppose. But—"

"Is it Vera Novy?"

Jiri sighed.

"You could not have lived through the befriending," suggested Sweeney, "and not know."

"I know. But the Russians must not. The police suspect others, here is no need—"

"Of course, old buddy. Where can I find her?"

"You do not remember who gives this to you," Jiri said, scribbling an address on a scrap of paper.

"I found it in her purse," Sweeney agreed. "Which I am returning to her."

"It is only right."

"And just," Sweeney said.

The tram deposited him in the middle of the Nove Mesto, the 600-year-old "New Town," within twenty minutes. Sweeney quickly found the apartment complex and knocked gently. No answer. Five minutes passed. Sweeney knocked again. An unseen hand nudged the door a few millimeters from the threshold.

"Miss Novy?"

"What is it? Who are you? Miss Novy is not at home."

"I found your purse in the corridor of the Jalta Hotel," Sweeney said. "I am bringing it to you."

"This is not possible. What do you—?"

Sweeney shoved the door open. A terrified young woman, yellow hair brushing her shoulders, stood poised for flight.

"It is not possible," Sweeney said. "You did not lose your purse. But you were at the Jalta the day before last. To see Ilyich."

"I know nobody—"

"The man who killed your brother seventeen years ago."

"I do not know—"

"On the contrary," Sweeney said, "you could never forget that man. You followed his career as a hockey player for their national team. You waited for years, until he came back to Prague. You came to seduce him. You manipulated him to a point somewhere between drunkenness and passion. Then you pushed him out the window."

"I—"

"Defenestrated him. An apt method of revenge, I must say."

Vera Novy had covered her face with her hands. "I would do it again. He deserved nothing less."

Sweeney touched her shoulder. "You have nothing to fear from me," he said gently. "I am an American journalist, Sweeney by name. I know everything about what happened. I saw the picture

of you weeping over your brother's body. I knew you had been at the hotel. I have no intention of informing the authorities. What interests me is justice. Which I believe has been done."

It was nearly midnight by the time Sweeney made his way back to the Jalta. Before entering, he snapped off a jaunty salute to the equestrian prince above the square, then sought Jiri inside.

"Our Miss Novy must be away," Sweeney shrugged. "I hammered on that door for hours."

In the morning, he met Lasek for coffee, rolls, and fruit preserves at the Municipal House, a lovely leftover from the Austro-Hungarian empire.

"It was the blonde with no name," Sweeney announced. "Who is called Vera Novy."

"And how do you know this?"

"History," said Sweeney, tearing apart a roll, "and a small bit of logic. We have four suspects, do we not? The heckler I immediately dismiss. Any Czech who really wanted to do away with a Russian wouldn't scream at him in public view. The KGB is not exactly the French Sureté, but they recognize the obvious when it claps them on the forehead. Besides, the police never get the right man, at least not the first time."

"You think like a socialist," Lasek said. "And your black-market fellow?"

"Svoboda couldn't take the chance. Everybody knows him. More than a few people probably despise him. Why else would Jiri mention him to me? To get him in trouble and throw me off the scent. Besides, Ilyich would have been on his guard around Svoboda. Dealing in *defitsitny* goods with a Czech citizen in a Prague hotel is dangerous business. In any case, Svoboda has a slender build. There's no chance he could have overpowered a sturdy Russian defenseman."

"Gusev could have."

"Why bother?" Sweeney said. "He knew it was probably Ilyich's last tournament. Next season Gusev has both starting positions, for the Army club and the national team. It didn't make sense to force the inevitable, especially once they'd had that argument at the ice hall. Everybody saw that, including the Czech rink attendants. I knew the murderer had to be a Czech."

Lasek nodded. "The defenestration."

"How else does one kill a political enemy here? Praguers have been pushing people out of open windows for nearly six hundred

years. The Hussites did it in 1419. The Bohemian nobles did it in 1618 to Emperor Ferdinand's officials and touched off the Thirty Years' War. The Communists did it to Jan Masaryk in 1948."

"And Vera Novy does it to Ilyich."

"It was the best method. His room was the only place where she would have private access to Ilyich. The Russian players are taken from hotel to rink and back to hotel day after day. She couldn't have gotten close to him without being seen. So she found a way to be alone with him in his room after the team left for the ice hall. He was always missing the bus. Anybody else, and the coaches would have sent someone to look for him. With Ilyich, it was expected."

"So she gets him drinking—"

"And Ilyich's libido does away with the rest of his defenses," Sweeney said. "My guess is that Miss Novy maneuvers our defenseman toward the window amid a prolonged embrace and history and gravity do the rest. Dusk had already fallen, it was a side street. There was plenty of time for her to slip downstairs and out of the building, particularly if the hotel officials were occupied elsewhere."

"It is curious how brother socialists develop poor eyesight and worse hearing whenever anything unfortunate befalls a Russian," Lasek mused. "I have seen this in Warsaw. You have heard that the police have let your hooligan go free?"

"It comes as no surprise to this reporter," Sweeney said.

"It seems that several worthy citizens vouched for his presence at that hour. They swore he was drinking beer at U Fleku, that noble place of refreshment."

"So the KGB remains mystified," Sweeney said. "As do I. It seems that the latest defenestration of Prague will go unsolved. Intriguing what happens to a man's powers of deduction when spring comes to the city by the Vltava. Dubcek could tell you."



a **NEW** short story by

LAWRENCE BLOCK

One of Lawrence Block's most memorable stories, in the March 1977 issue of Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, was "Nothing Short of Highway Robbery," a tale you may also recognize from its adaptation on the TV anthology series, Tales of the Unexpected. Here is another story from Mr. Block that displays an uncanny empathy for the long-distance driver—and the special expertise that earned him, this May, an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America for best mystery short story published last year ("By the Dawn's Early Light" in the August 1984 Playboy) . . .

LIKE A BUG ON A WINDSHIELD

by **LAWRENCE BLOCK**

There are two Rodeway Inns in Indianapolis, but Waldron only knew the one on West Southern Avenue, near the airport. He made it a point to break trips there if he could do so without going out of his way or messing up his schedule. There were eight or ten motels around the country that were favorites of his, some of them chain affiliates, a couple of them independents. A Days Inn south of Tulsa, for example, was right across the street from a particularly good restaurant. A Quality Court outside of Jacksonville had friendly staff and big cakes of soap in the bathroom. Sometimes he didn't know exactly why a motel was on his list, and he thought that it might be habit, like the brand of cigarettes he smoked, and that habit in turn might be largely a matter of convenience. Easier to buy Camels every time than to stand around deciding what you felt

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like smoking. Easier to listen to WJJD out of Chicago until the signal faded, then dial on down to KOMA in Omaha, than to hunt around and try to guess what kind of music you wanted to hear and where you were likely to find it.

It was more than habit, though, that made him stop at the Indianapolis Rodeway when he was in the neighborhood. They made it nice for a trucker without running a place that felt like a truckstop. There was a separate lot for the big rigs, of course, but there was also a twenty-four-hour check-in area around back just for truckers, with a couple of old boys sitting around in chairs and country music playing on the radio. The coffee was always hot and always free, and it was real coffee out of a Silex, not the brown dishwater the machines dispensed.

Inside, the rooms were large and clean and the beds comfortable. There was a huge indoor pool with Jacuzzi and sauna. A good bar, an okay restaurant—and, before you hit the road again, there was more free coffee at the truckers' room in back.

Sometimes a guy could get lucky at the bar or around the pool. If not, well, there was free HBO on the color television and direct-dial phones to call home on. You wouldn't drive five hundred miles out of your way, but it was worth planning your trip to stop there.

He walked into the Rodeway truckers' room around nine on a hot July night. The room was air-conditioned but the door was always open, so the air-conditioning didn't make much difference. Lundy rocked back in his chair and looked up at him. "Hey, boy," Lundy said. "Where you *been*?"

"Drivin'," he said, giving the ritual response to the ritual question.

"Yeah, I guess. You look about as grey as this desk. Get yourself a cup of coffee, I think you need it."

"What I need is about four ounces of bourbon and half an hour in the Jacuzzi."

"And two hours with the very best TWA has to offer," Lundy said. "What we all need, but meantime grab some coffee."

"I guess," Waldron said, and poured himself a cup. He blew on the surface to cool it and glanced around the room. Besides Lundy, a chirpy little man with wire-rimmed glasses and a built-up shoe, there were three truckers in the room. Two, like Waldron, were drinking coffee out of styrofoam cups. The third man was drinking Hudepohl beer out of the can.

Waldron filled out the registration card, paid with his Visa card,

pocketed his room key and receipt. Then he sat down and took another sip of his coffee.

"The way some people drive," he said.

There were murmurs of agreement.

"About forty miles out of here," he said, "I'm on the Interstate—what's the matter with me, I can't even think of the god-damned number—"

"Easy, boy."

"Yeah, easy." He took a breath, sipped at his coffee, blew at the surface. It was cool enough to drink, but blowing on it was reflexive, habitual. "Two kids in a Toyota. I thought at first it was two guys, but it was a guy and a girl. I'm going about five miles over the limit, not pushing it, and they pass me on a slight uphill and then they cut in tight. I gotta step on my brake or I'm gonna walk right up their back bumper."

"These people don't know how to drive," one of the coffee drinkers said. "I don't know where they get their licenses."

"Through the mails," the beer drinker said. "Out of the Monkey Ward catalogue."

"So I tapped the horn," Waldron said. "Just a tap, you know? And the guy was driving, he taps back."

"Honks his horn."

"Right. And slows down. Sixty-two, sixty, fifty-eight, he's dying out there in front of me. So I wait, and I flip the brights on and off to signal him, and then I go around him and wait until I'm plenty far ahead of him before I move back in."

"And he passes you again," said the other coffee drinker, speaking for the first time.

"How'd you know?"

"He cut in sharp again?"

Waldron nodded. "I guess I was expecting it once he moved out to pass me. I eased up on the gas, and when he cut in I had to touch the brake, but it wasn't close, and this time I didn't bother hitting the horn."

"I'da used the horn," the beer drinker said. "I'da *stood up* on the horn."

"Then he slowed down again," the second coffee drinker said. "Am I right?"

"What are these guys, friends of yours?"

"They slow down again?"

"To a crawl. And then I *did* use the horn, and the girl turned

round and gave me the finger." He drank the rest of the coffee. "And I got angry," he said. "I pulled out. I put the pedal on the floor and I moved out in front of them—and this time they're not gonna let me pass, you know, they're gonna pace me, fast when I speed up, slow when I lay off. And they're looking up at me, and they're laughing, and she's leaning across his lap and she's got her blouse or the front of her dress, whatever it is, she's got it pushed down, you know, like I've never seen it before and my eyeballs are gonna go out on talks—"

"Like in a cartoon."

"Right. And I thought, You idiots, because all I had to do, you know, was turn the wheel. Because where are they gonna go? The shoulder? They won't have time to get there. I'll run right over them, I'll smear 'em like a bug on the windshield. Splat, and they're gone."

"I like that," Lundy said.

Waldron took a breath. "I almost did it," he said.

"How much is almost?"

"I could feel it in my hands," he said. He held them out in front of him, shaped to grip a steering wheel. "I could feel the thought going into my hands, to turn that wheel and flatten them. I could see it all happening. I had the picture in my mind, and I was seeing myself driving away from them, just driving off, and they're wrecked and burning."

Lundy whistled.

"And I had the thought, That's murder! And the thought like registered, but I was still going to do it, the hell with it. My hands—" He flexed his fingers "—my hands were ready to move on the wheel, and then it was gone."

"The Toyota was gone?"

"The *thought* was gone. I hit the brake and I got behind them and rest area came up and I took it, fast. I pulled in and cut the engine and had a smoke. I was all alone there. It was empty and I was hinking that maybe they'd come back and pull into the rest area, too, and if they did I was gonna take him on with a tire iron. There's one I keep in the front seat with me and I actually got it down from the rig and walked around with it in one hand, smoking a cigarette and swinging the tire iron just so I'll be ready."

"You see 'em again?"

"No. They were just a couple of kids clowning around, probably working themselves up. Now they'll get into the back seat and have themselves a workout."

"I don't envy them," Lundy said. "Not in the back seat of an effing Toyota."

"What they don't know," said Waldron, "is how close they came to being dead."

They were all looking up at him. The second coffee drinker, a dark-haired man with deep-set brown eyes, smiled. "You really think it was close?"

"I told you, I almost—"

"So how close is almost? You thought about it and then you didn't do it."

"I thought about making it with Jane Fonda," Lundy said, "but then I didn't do it."

"I was going to do it," Waldron said.

"And then you didn't."

"And then I didn't." He shook a cigarette out of his pack and picked up Lundy's Zippo and lit it. "I don't know where the angel came from. I was angry enough to kill. Why? Because the girl shot me a bone? Because she wagged her—?"

"Because you were afraid," the first coffee drinker suggested.

"Afraid of what? I got eighteen wheels under me, I'm hauling building materials, how'm I afraid of a Toyota? It's not my ass if I hit them." He took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked at it. "But you're right," he said. "I was scared I'd hit them and kill them and that turned into anger, and I almost *did* kill them."

"Maybe you should have," someone said. Waldron was still looking at his cigarette, not noticing who was speaking. "Whole road's full of amateurs and people thinking they're funny. Maybe you got to teach 'em a lesson."

"Swat 'em," someone else said. "Like you said, bug on the windshield."

"I'm just a bug on the windshield of life," Lundy sang in a tuneless falsetto whine. "Now who was it sang that or did I just make it up?" Dolly Parton, the beer drinker suggested. "Now wouldn't I just love to be a bug on her windshield?" Lundy said.

Waldron picked up his bag and went to look for his room.

Eight, ten weeks later, he was eating eggs and scrapple in a diner on Route One outside of Bordentown, New Jersey. The diner was called the Super Chief and was designed to look like a diesel locomotive and painted with aluminum paint. Waldron was reading

paper someone else had left in the booth. He almost missed the story, but then he saw it.

A camper had plunged through a guard rail and off an embankment on a branch of the Interstate near Gatlinburg, Tennessee. The driver, an instructor at Ozark Community College in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, had survived with massive chest and leg injuries. His wife and infant son had died in the crash.

According to the driver, an eighteen-wheeler had come up "out of nowhere" and shoved the little RV off the road. "It's like he was a snowplow," he said, "and he was clearing us out of the way."

Like a bug on a windshield, thought Waldron.

He read the story again, closed the paper. His hand was shaking as he picked up his cup of coffee. He put the cup down, took a few deep breaths, then picked up the cup again without trembling.

He pictured them in the truckers' room at the Rodeway, Lundy rocking back in his chair with his feet up, built-up shoe and all. The beer drinker, the two coffee drinkers. Had he even heard their names? He couldn't remember, nor could he keep their images in focus in his memory. But he could hear their voices. And he could hear his own, suggesting an act not unlike the one he had just read about.

My God, had he given someone an idea?

He sipped his coffee, left the rest of his food untouched on the plate. Scrapple was a favorite of his and you could only find it in and around Philadelphia, and they did it right here, fried it crisp and served it with maple syrup, but he was letting the grease congeal around it now. That one coffee drinker, the one with the deep-set eyes, was he the one who'd spoken the words, but he remembered the anger in them, and something else, too, something like a blood lust.

Of course, the teacher could have dreamed the part about the eighteen-wheeler. Could have gone to sleep at the wheel and made up a story to keep him from seeing he'd driven off the road and killed his own family. Pin it on the Phantom Trucker and keep the blame off your own self.

Probably how it happened.

Still, from that morning on, Waldron kept an eye on the papers.

"Hey, boy," Lundy said. "Where you been?"

It was a cold December afternoon, overcast, with a raw wind blowing out of the northwest. The daylight ran out early this time of

year but there were hours of it left. Waldron had broken his trip early just to stop at the Rodeway.

"Been up and down the Seaboard," he said. "Mostly. Hauling a lot of loads in and out of Baltimore." Of course there'd been some cross-country trips, too, but he'd managed to miss Indianapolis each time, once or twice distorting his schedule as much to avoid Indy as he'd fooled with it today to get here.

"Been a while," Lundy said.

"Six months."

"That long?"

"July, last I was here."

"Makes five months, don't it?"

"Well, early July. Say five and a half."

"Say a year and a half if you want. Your wife asks, I'll swear you was never here at all. Get some coffee, boy."

There was another trucker sitting with a cup of coffee, a bearded longhair with a fringed buckskin jacket, and he'd laughed at Lundy's remark. Waldron poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down with it, sitting quietly, listening to the radio and the two men's light banter. When the fellow in bucksin left, Waldron leaned forward.

"The last time I was here," he said.

"July, if we take your word for it."

"I was wired that night, I'd had a clown playing tag with me on the road."

"If you say so."

"There were three truckers in here plus yourself. One was drinking beer and the other two were drinking coffee."

Lundy looked at him.

"What I need to know," Waldron said, "is their names."

"You must be kidding."

"It wouldn't be hard to find out. You'd have the registrations. I checked the date, it was the ninth of July."

"Wait a minute." Lundy rocked his chair back and put both feet on the metal desk. Waldron glanced at the built-up shoe. "A night in July," Lundy said. "What in hell happened?"

"You must remember. I almost had an accident with a wiseass, cut me off, played tag, made a game of it. I was saying how angry I was, how I wanted to kill him."

"So?"

"I wanted to kill him with the truck."

"So?"

"Don't you remember? Something I said, you made a song out of it. I said I could have killed him like a bug on the windshield."

"Now I remember," Lundy said, showing interest. "Just a bug on the windshield of life, that's the song that came to me, I couldn't get it out of my head for the next ten or twelve days. Now I'll be stuck with it for the *next* ten or twelve days, like as not. Don't tell me you want to haul my ass down to Nashville and make me a star."

"What I want," Waldron said evenly, "is for you to check the registrations and figure out who was in the room that night."

"Why?"

"Because somebody's doing it."

Lundy looked at him.

"Killing people. With trucks."

"Killing people with trucks? Killing drivers or owners or what?"

"Using trucks as murder weapons," Waldron said. On the radio, David Allen Coe insisted he was an outlaw like Waylon and Willie. 'Running people off the road. Flyswatting 'em."

"How d'you know all this?"

"Look," Waldron said. He took an envelope from his pocket, unfolded it, and spread newspaper clippings on the top of Lundy's desk. Without removing his feet from the desk, Lundy leaned forward to scan the clips. "These are from all over," he said after a moment.

"I know."

"Any of these here could be an accident."

"Then somebody's leaving the scene of a lot of accidents. Last I heard, there was a law against it."

"Could be a whole lot of different accidents."

"It could," Waldron admitted. "But I don't believe it. It's murder and it's one man doing it and I know who he is."

"Who?"

"At least I think I know."

"You gonna tell me or is it a secret?"

"Not the beer drinker," Waldron said. "One of the two fellows who were drinking coffee."

"Narrows it down. Not too many old boys drive trucks and drink coffee."

"I can almost picture him. Deep-set eyes, dark hair, sort of a dark complexion. He had a way of speaking. I can almost hear his voice."

"What makes you think he's the one?"

"I don't know. You want to get those registrations?"

He didn't, and Waldron had to talk him into it. Then there were

three check-ins, one right after the other, and two of the men lingered with their coffee. When they left, Lundy heaved a sigh and told Waldron to mind the store. He limped off and came back ten minutes later with a stack of index cards.

"July the nine," he announced, sinking into his chair and slapping the cards onto the desk. "You want to deal those, we can play some Five Hundred Rummy. You got enough cards for it."

Not quite. There were forty-three registrations that had come through the truckers' check-in room for that date. Just over half were names that one of the two men recognized and could rule out as the possible identity of the dark-eyed coffee drinker. But there were still twenty possibles, names that meant nothing to either man—and Lundy explained that their man might not have filled in a card.

"He could of shared a room and the other man registered," he said, "or he could have just come by for the coffee and the company. There's old boys every night that pull in for half an hour and the free coffee, or maybe they're taking a meal break and they come around back to say hello. So what you got, you got it narrowed down to twenty, but he might not be one of the twenty anyway. You get tired of driving a truck, boy, you can get a job with Sherlock Holmes. Get you the cap and the pipe, nobody'll know the difference."

Waldron was going through the cards, reading the names and addresses.

"Looking through a stack of cards for a man who maybe isn't there in the first place and who probably didn't do anything anyway. And what are you gonna do if you find him?"

"I don't know."

"Where's it your business, come to that?"

Waldron didn't say anything at first. Then he said, "I gave him the idea."

"With what you said? Bug on the windshield?"

"That's right."

"Oh, that's crazy," Lundy said. "Where you been, boy? I hear that same kind of talk four days out of seven. Guy walks in, hot about some fool who almost made him lose it, next thing you know he's saying how instead of driving off the road, next time he'll drive right *through* the mother. Even if somebody's doin' this—" he tapped Waldron's clippings—"which I don't think they are, there's no way it's you gave him the idea. My old man, he'd wash his car and then

it'd rain and he'd swear it was him brought the rain on. You're startin' to remind me of him, you know that?"

"I can picture him," Waldron said. "Sitting up behind the wheel, a light rain coming down, the windshield wipers working at the low speed. And he's smiling."

"And about to run some sucker off the road."

"I can just see it so clear. This one time—" he sorted through the newspaper clippings "—downstate Illinois, this sportscar. Witness said a truck just ran right over it."

"Like steppin' on it," Lundy said thoughtfully.

"And when I think about it—"

"You don't know it's on purpose," Lundy said. "All the pills some of you old boys take. And you don't know it's one man doing it, and you don't know it's him, and you don't know who he is anyway. And you don't know you gave him the idea, and if there's a God or not you ain't. It, so why are you makin' yourself crazy over it?"

"Well, you got a point," Waldron said.

He went to his room, showered, put on swim trunks, and picked up a towel. He went back and forth from the sauna to the pool and into the Jacuzzi and back into the pool again. He swam some laps, then stretched out on a chaise next to the pool. He listened, eyes closed, while a man with a soft hill-country accent was trying to teach his young son to swim. Then he must have dozed off, and when he opened his eyes he was alone in the pool area. He returned to his room, showered, shaved, put on fresh clothes, and went to the bar.

It was a nice room—low lighting, comfortable chairs and bar stools. Some decorator had tricked it out with a library motif, and there were bookshelves here and there with real books in them. At least Waldron supposed they were real books. He'd never seen anyone reading one of them.

He settled in at the bar with bourbon and dry-roast peanuts from the dish on the bartop. An hour later he was in a conversation, and thirty minutes after that he was back in his room, bedded down with an old girl named Claire who said she was assistant manager of the giftshop at the airport. She was partial to truckers, she told him. She'd even married one, and although it hadn't worked out they remained good friends. "Man drives for a living, chances are he's thoughtful and considerate and sure of himself, you know what I mean?"

Waldron saw those deep-set brown eyes looking over the steering wheel. And that slow smile.

After that he seemed to catch a lot of cross-country hauling and he stopped pretty regularly at the Rodeway. It was convenient enough, and the Jacuzzi was a big attraction during the winter months. It really took the road-tension out of you.

Claire was an attraction, too. He didn't see her every visit, but if the hour was right he sometimes gave her a call and they sometimes got together. She'd come by for a drink or a swim, and one night he put on a jacket and took her to dinner in town at the King Cole.

She knew he was married and felt neither jealousy nor guilt about it. "Me and my ex," she said, "it wasn't what he did on the road that broke us up. It was what he didn't do when he was home."

It was mid-March when he finally found the man. And it was nowhere near Indianapolis.

It was a truck stop just east of Tucumcari, New Mexico, and he'd had no intention of stopping there. He'd had breakfast a while back in a Tex-Mex diner midway between Gallup and Albuquerque, and by the time he hit Tucumcari his gut was rumbling and he was ready for an unscheduled pit stop. He picked a place he'd never stopped at. If it had a name he didn't know what it was. The signs said nothing but *Diesel Fuel* and *Truckers Welcome*. He clambered down from the cab and used the john, then went in for a cup of coffee he didn't particularly want.

And saw the man right away.

He'd been able to picture the eyes and the smile, and a pair of hands on a wheel. Now the image enlarged to include a round, close-cropped head with a receding hairline, a bulldog jaw, a massive pair of shoulders. The man sat on a stool at the counter, drinking coffee and reading a magazine, and Waldron just stood for a moment, looking at him.

There was a point where he almost turned and walked out. It passed, and instead he took the adjoining stool and ordered coffee. When the girl brought it, he let it sit there. Beside him, the man with the deep-set eyes was reading an article about bonefishing in the Florida Keys.

"Nice day out there," Waldron said.

The man raised his eyes, nodded.

"I think I met you sometime last summer. Indianapolis, the Rode-way Inn."

"I've been there."

"I met you in Lundy's room in the back. There were three men there beside Lundy. One of them was drinking a can of Hudepohl."

"You got a memory," the man said.

"Well, the night stuck in my mind. I had a close one out on the highway, I came in jawing about it. A jerk in a car playing tag with me and I came in mad enough to talk about running him off the road, killing him."

"I remember that night," the man said, and he smiled the way Waldron remembered. "Now I remember you."

Waldron sipped his coffee.

"Like a bug on a windshield," the man said. "I remember you saying that. Next little while, every time some insect went and gummed up the glass, it came to me, you saying that. You ever find them?"

"Find who?"

"Whoever was playing tag with you."

"I never looked for them."

"You were mad enough to," the man said. "That night you were."

"I got over it."

"Well, people get over things."

There was a whole unspoken conversation going on and Waldron wanted to cut through and get to it. "Who I been looking for," he said, "is I been looking for you."

"Oh?"

"I get things in my mind I can't get rid of," Waldron said. "I'll get a thought working and I won't be able to let go of it for a hundred miles. And my stomach's been turning on me."

"You lost me on a curve there."

"What we talked about. What I said that night, just running my mouth, and you picked up on it." Waldron's hands worked, forming into fists, opening again. "I read the papers," he said. "I find stories, I clip them out of the papers." He met the man's eyes. "I know what you're doing," he said.

"Oh?"

"And I gave you the idea," he said.

"You think so, huh?"

"The thought keeps coming to me," Waldron said. "I can't shake it off. I drop it and it comes back."

"You want the rest of that coffee?" Waldron looked at his cup, put it down unfinished. "C'mon then," the man said and put money on the counter to cover both their checks.

Waldron kept his newspaper clippings in a manila envelope in the zippered side pocket of his bag. The bag rode on the floor of the cab in front of the passenger seat. They were standing beside the cab now, facing away from the sun. The man was going through some of the clippings and Waldron was holding the rest of them.

"You must read a lot of papers," the man said.

Waldron didn't say anything.

"You think I been killing people. With my truck."

"I thought so, all these months."

"And now?"

"I still think so."

"You think I did all these here. And you think you started it all by getting mad at some fool driver in Indiana."

Waldron felt the sun on the back of his neck. The world had gone silent and all he could hear was his own breathing.

Then the man said, "This here one was mine. Little panel truck, electrical contractor or some damn thing. Rode him right off a mountain. I didn't figure he'd walk away from it, but then I didn't stay around to find out, you know, and I don't get around to reading the papers much." He put the clipping on the pile. "A few of these are mine," he said.

Waldron felt a pressure in his chest, as if his heart had turned to iron and was being drawn by a magnet.

"But most of these," the man went on, "the hell, I'd have to work night and day doing nothing else. I mean, figure it out, huh? Some of these are accidents, just like they're written up."

"And the rest?"

"The rest are a whole lot of guys like you and me taking a whack at somebody once in a while. You think it's one man doing all of it and you said something to get him started, hell, put your mind to rest. I did it a couple of times before you ever said a word. And I wasn't the first trucker ever thought of it, or the first ever did it."

"Why?"

"Why do it?"

Waldron nodded.

"Sometimes to teach some son of a bitch a lesson. Sometimes to get the anger out. And sometimes—look, you ever go hunting?"

"Years ago, with my old man."

"You remember what it felt like?"

"Just that I was scared all the time," Waldron said, remembering. "That I'd do something wrong, miss a shot or make noise or something, and my dad would get mad at me."

"So you never got to like it."

"No."

"Well, it's like hunting," the man said. "Seeing if you can do it. And there's you and him, and it's like you're dancing, and then he's gone and you're all that's left. It's like a bullfight, it's like shooting a bird on the wing. There's something about it that's beautiful."

Waldron couldn't speak.

"It's just a once-in-a-while thing," the man said. "It's a way to have fun, that's all. It's no big deal."

He drove all day, eastbound on 66, his mind churning and his stomach a wreck. He stopped often for coffee, sitting by himself, voiding conversations with other drivers. Any of them could be a murderer, he thought, and once he fancied that they were all murderers, unpunished killers racing back and forth across the country, running down anyone who got in their way.

He knew he ought to eat, and twice he ordered food only to leave it untouched on his plate. He drank coffee and smoked cigarettes and just kept going.

At a diner somewhere he reached for a newspaper someone else had left behind. Then he changed his mind and drew away from it. When he returned to his truck he took the manila envelope of newspaper clippings from his bag and dropped it into a trashcan. He couldn't clip any more stories, he knew, and for the next little while he wouldn't even read the papers. Because he'd only be looking for stories he didn't want to find.

He kept driving. He thought about stopping when the sky darkened but he decided against it. Sleep just seemed out of the question. Being off the highway for longer than it took to gulp a cup of coffee seemed impossible. He played the radio once or twice but turned it off almost immediately; the country music he normally liked just didn't sound right to him. At one point he switched on the CB—he hardly ever listened to it these days, and now the chatter that came over it sounded like a mockery. They were out there killing people for sport, he thought, and they were chatting away in that hokey gang and he couldn't stand it . . .

Four in the morning, or close to it, he was on a chunk of Interstate in Missouri or maybe Iowa—he wasn't too sure where he was, his mind was running all over the place. The median strip was broad here and you couldn't see the lights of cars in the other lane. The traffic was virtually nonexistent—it was like he was the only driver on the road, a trucker's Flying Dutchman or something out of a Dave Dudley song, doomed to ride empty highways until the end of time.

Crazy.

There were lights in his mirror. High beams, somebody coming up fast. He moved to his right, hugging the shoulder.

The other vehicle moved out and hovered alongside him. For a mindless instant he had the thought that it was the man with the deep-set eyes, the killer come to kill him. But this wasn't even a truck, this was a car, and it was just sort of dippy-doodling along next to Waldron. Waldron wondered what was the matter with the damn fool.

Then the car passed him in a quick burst of speed and Waldron saw what it was.

The guy was drunk.

He got past Waldron's rig, cut in abruptly, then almost drove off the road before he got the wheel straightened out again. He couldn't keep the car in line, he kept wandering off to the left or the right, he was all over the road.

An effing menace, Waldron thought.

He took his own foot off the gas and let the car pull away from him, watching the taillights get smaller in the distance. Only when the car was out of sight did Waldron bring his truck back up to running speed.

His mind wandered then, drifting along some byway, and he came back into present time to note that he was driving faster than usual, pushing past the speed limit. He found he was still doing it even after he noticed it.

Why?

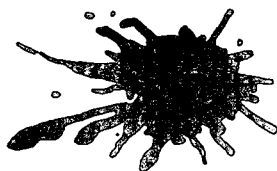
When the taillights came into view, he realized what he'd subconsciously been doing all along. He was looking for the drunk driver, and there he was. He recognized the taillights. Even if he hadn't, he'd recognize the way the car swung from side to side, raising gravel on the shoulder, then wandering way over into the left-hand lane and back again.

Drivers like that were dangerous. They killed people every day and the cops couldn't keep the bastards off the roads. Look at this crazy son of a bitch, look at him, for God sake, he was all over the place, he was sure to kill himself if he didn't kill someone else first.

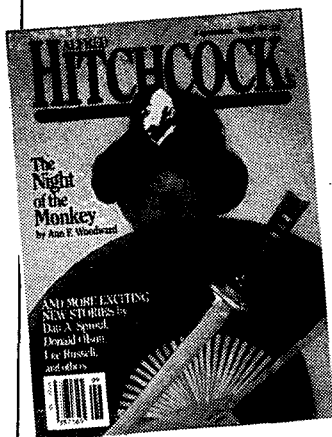
Downhill stretch coming up. Waldron was loaded up with kitchen appliances, just a hair under his maximum gross weight. Give him a stretch of downhill loaded like that, hell, wasn't anyone could run away from him going downhill.

He looked at the weaving car in front of him. Nobody else out in front, nobody in his mirror. Something quickened in his chest. He got a flash of deep-set eyes and a knowing smile.

He put the gas pedal on the floor.



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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This time (not for the first time) we bring you a pair of firsts—from Ronnie Klaskin, in her late forties and obviously possessed of a vivid imagination and the ability to translate her imaginings to the printed page. "I am in my late forties," she told us, "and have been a teacher, a speech therapist, a housewife, and a stand-up comic. Last year I received an M.F.A. in Fiction Writing from Vermont College. I am now working full time at writing. My hobbies are reading (particularly mysteries), walking, taking workshops, and playing with my dog." At the time the author wrote these stories she was a student in Lawrence Block's mystery-writing class sponsored by the Mystery Writers of America. Thank you, Ms. Klaskin, thank you, Mr. Block, thank you, MWA . . .

SCARED IN NEW JERSEY

by **RONNIE KLASKIN**

Dear Millie:

I never thought I would be writing to you for advice. I love reading your column in the paper, but the thought that I would actually be writing to you one day was the furthest thing from my mind.

You see, I've been close to idyllically happy, just like the heroines in the romance novels I love to read. I've got an almost perfect husband. Gregory—that's not his real name, of course—is very handsome and successful. He doesn't smoke or drink or go out with other women. He's an attorney. We have a beautiful home in the suburbs and I go to the health spa and the beauty parlor and wear fashionable clothes. What more could a woman ask for?

Now for the problem, Millie. Gregory bought a new car, a dark-blue Mercedes. Gregory loves that car. He keeps it polished and clean. There isn't a scratch on it. When Gregory drives his car—his

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pride and joy, he calls it (we don't have any children)—he gets absolutely infuriated with the other drivers on the road. Murderous. He's made some of the most dire threats—he'd like to pull this one from his car and beat him to a pulp; he'd like to scrunch that car to waste metal, with the driver in it. I think he really means it and that the only thing that's stopped him so far is that he wouldn't risk scratching the Mercedes. But if anyone should do so much as dent a fender of that Mercedes, there's no telling what Gregory would do. I'm,

Scared in New Jersey

Dear Scared in New Jersey:

I can understand your feelings. I can also understand Gregory's. There is something about a brand new car that brings out the worst in people.

I remember when my Cadillac was new. I was so proud of it. When people cut me off I would use language, I regret to admit, that I would never print in this paper. Finally I scratched it myself, back-parking a little too close to a tree.

Cars are alter-egos. Especially to men. Gregory's behavior, I'm sorry to say, sounds rather normal. The likelihood that he will actually commit violence seems very remote.

Dear Millie:

Well, it finally happened. I don't want to say you were wrong, but, you see, you don't know Gregory. I do.

We were driving along on a fairly deserted road the other night on the way home from a dinner-dance. It looked like Gregory was up for a judgeship. He was in a very good mood. Then these kids in an old tan Ford came speeding past and cut ahead of us. Gregory became livid. He raced after them, totally ignoring the speed limit. When he caught up with them he forced their car off the road into a ditch. "Probably drunk drivers," he said. "This way they can't cause an accident." Luckily no one was hurt. But I'm still,

Scared in New Jersey

Dear Scared in New Jersey:

Sorry about the bad advice last time. I didn't realize it was so serious. As you say, I don't know Gregory and you do. It sounds to me as though he needs professional help. You should have him see a psychotherapist or have him speak to his clergyman.

Dear Millie:

We no longer have a clergyman. Gregory got into a fight with our minister some years back, and as a result we stopped going to church. Gregory says we might start attending again now that he is about to become a judge.

I did suggest to Gregory that he see a psychiatrist and he belted me across the mouth. "How can you be so dumb?" he shouted. "Don't you realize what that would do to my career?"

My lower lip bled a lot when Gregory hit me, and now it's all blue and swollen. Gregory is very upset. He usually tries not to leave any marks. He squeezes my shoulder until I cry out in pain or twists my arm all the way back. Anyway, he won't be seeing a therapist.

Bruised in New Jersey

Dear Bruised in New Jersey:

I was horrified when I read your letter. If Gregory won't go for therapy, then you must go by yourself.

Dear Millie:

How could I possibly go for therapy? If Gregory knew, he'd kill me. He controls all the money in the house. Oh, he's very generous—I have charge accounts at all the best stores—but he'd know it if I tried to pay a therapist.

Gregory isn't really a cruel husband. He only hits me when I deserve it. I try to be a good wife, but sometimes I get lazy. Once in a while I don't have Gregory's dinner waiting when he gets home. He's hungry and has worked hard all day in order to provide me with our lovely home and all our lovely things. He's entitled.

Once Gregory almost broke my arm, he twisted it back so hard. It was when I said I wanted to return to college. I wouldn't have time, he said, to be a proper wife. My arm hurt for weeks. I couldn't have done class papers anyway.

My father used to keep me in line by punishing me also. It worked. I did well in school and helped my mother with the housework. I met Gregory in my first year of college, right after my father died of a heart attack. It was very romantic. Gregory was a lot older—he was already practicing law—and he took me to the finest restaurant and brought me red roses. When we got married I quit school to keep house for him. I wish I could be a perfect wife. After all, Gregory is an almost perfect husband.

Trying Hard in New Jersey

Dear Trying Hard in New Jersey:

If you won't go to therapy, please call the nearest women's center. Perhaps they can put you in touch with a support group for battered wives. That will not cost anything and Gregory needn't find out.

Dear Millie:

I did call the women's center and they do have a group for abused wives. I went down there twice and I think they might have been able to help me if I'd stayed, but the most awful coincidence happened.

There is a woman reporter who was writing a series of articles on Gregory, now that he was going to be a judge. She was also doing an article on battered women and she recognized me when she came to the center. We had met before when she wrote about Gregory's perfect home and domestic life for our newspaper's Sunday supplement.

Anyway, she called Gregory and asked if I was doing volunteer work for the women's center. It never occurred to her that I might be a battered wife. It was in the evening, after a very tough day, that Gregory got her call. He had his jacket off and his shirt sleeves rolled up. His keys and wallet were on the buffet in the dining room. We had just finished dinner and I was clearing the table.

Gregory was furious. He looked as he had in the car when he forced those boys off the road that day. His face was purple. The veins in his neck and forehead bulged. He knocked the dishes out of my hand and I really thought he would kill me, he was so mad.

One thing I learned in the women's center was not to just stay around and take it. I grabbed Gregory's car keys from the buffet and ran out and got into the Mercedes. I locked the doors. Gregory ran out after me, shouting. He tried the doors of the car and when he realized they were locked he stood in front of the car and blocked any way.

Oh, you were so right, Millie, when you said that being in a new car can encourage feelings of violence in the driver. They should put warnings in all new cars: "Driving this vehicle can be dangerous to our mental health." I never understood what it was that Gregory had been feeling until that moment.

Awaiting Trial in New Jersey

COMPLETING RELATIONSHIPS

by **RONNIE KLASKIN**

Sheila had taken everything. She had done est and Silva Mind Control and D.N.A. and Women, Sex, and Power. She had been in Freudian therapy and Gestalt therapy and Transactional Analysis, trying to find out if there was any reason why she always picked men who wouldn't make a commitment. She took assertiveness training and consciousness raising and read all the self-help books she could find.

Sheila wanted to get married. She wanted to have a baby. She was thirty-eight years old and she was terrified that it would never happen. Her biological clock was ticking away.

Sheila put her intention out into the world. She wrote affirmations: *I am a marriageable woman. I will make a wonderful wife and mother.* She taped them onto her refrigerator door and on her bathroom mirror.

She went into her alpha state and visualized exactly the type of man she wanted to marry. He was tall and blond with bulging muscles and an endearing smile.

She completed her relationships with all her ex-lovers—at least those she was able to locate. She called them up and told them that she had really loved them once. She told them they had hurt her deeply when they abandoned her. She told them they were narcissistic and emotionally arrested. Most of them hung up. Sheila didn't care. She was making space for a new, better relationship.

One day, while she was walking along Seventh Avenue, Sheila saw the man of her dreams. He was tall, blond, and well muscled and was walking five dogs—a standard poodle, an airedale, a husky, a golden retriever, and a brown dog of indeterminate ancestry. Before Sheila had taken assertiveness training, she would never have approached a stranger. Even now, she questioned it. But the presence of the dogs seemed to label him safe. Dogs were reliable recommendations, almost like formal introductions.

"Are they all yours?" Sheila asked.

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He smiled at her, displaying perfect, gleaming teeth. "No," he said. "I'm a professional dog walker."

"Do you earn a living at it?"

"Barely. I'm an actor. I don't earn a living at that, either. Yet."

Sheila walked along with him as the dogs lifted their legs, squatted, and sniffed at lampposts. She found out that his name was Lance—Lancelot Merlin III—and that he was an army brat and had never lived in one place for more than a couple of years, that he did get occasional work on commercials and under-fives on soaps, and that his dream was to have a starring role in a soap opera.

Sheila told him she lived in Greenwich Village in a one-bedroom apartment with a real fireplace, a bargain she had found through her work as a real-estate broker.

When they parted, he took her phone number. Sheila could hardly believe her luck.

The next night he called. In less than a month he moved in with her. "Good riddance to roach-infested studios," he said. After a while, he gave up his dog-walking job as well. Sheila was making enough money to support them both.

Sheila would go into her alpha state. She would visualize herself walking down the aisle with Lance at her side. She would visualize herself holding a newborn baby boy, eight pounds, ten ounces—Lancelot Merlin IV—with blond hair and a toothless but promising smile.

She wrote affirmations: *I deserve to become a mother. I will be Mrs. Lancelot Merlin III.* She fit them into the lid of her jewel box and in the front cover of her *Intensive Journal*.

She called her parents in Ohio and completed her relationship with them. She told them she loved them despite the fact that they were lousy parents. They never came to see her in a school play. They favored her older brother. They were stingy. Her mother hung up. No matter—Sheila was creating space for the next generation.

Every once in a while she mentioned marriage and babies and Lance would give her one of his dazzling smiles. "I'm not ready," he'd say. "Maybe when I get a good job on a soap and I can support family."

Sheila had Lance go into his alpha state. She had him visualize the part he wanted. She had him write affirmations: *I deserve to star in a soap opera. I am worthy of fame and fortune.* She plastered them on the refrigerator door and on the bathroom mirror.

She had Lance complete his relationship with his agent. His agent hung up. That created space for Lance to get a new agent. The new agent sent Lance out on an audition. Lance got one call back and then another and another. He got the job: a principal role on a soap opera.

"It's in California," Lance said. "I'll be leaving the end of the month."

Why did things work out for everyone else, but never for Sheila? She was attractive, a decent person, intelligent. Why couldn't she hold a man?

She looked in the bathroom mirror. She saw some grey hairs. She saw some wrinkles between her eyes. She saw Lance's affirmations. She ripped them into little pieces and flushed them down the toilet. She opened the medicine chest.

When Sheila had turned thirty-five, she had been depressed. She'd had trouble falling asleep at night. The therapist she was seeing at the time prescribed sleeping pills. Sheila took one but woke up the next morning with a headache and decided not to take any more. However, she didn't tell her therapist and had had the prescription renewed three times.

Sheila decided that any therapist who would give a depressed patient so many sleeping pills was a lousy therapist. She told him so, which completed her relationship with him and created space for her to move on to her next therapy. There, her depression improved and she decided not to kill herself.

Until now. If Lance left, there was no point in living. But why should he get off, go to California, star in a soap opera, and make out with all those gorgeous starlets?

On the night before Lance was to leave, Sheila made some chili his favorite meal. She made it spicy so they couldn't taste the sleeping pills.

They both had extra large portions.

"I can't understand why I'm so sleepy," Lance yawned as he finished his beer. "My arms and legs feel like lead. I think I'll turn in early and get a good night's sleep. I have to be up at dawn tomorrow to catch my plane. This way, maybe I'll beat jet lag."

In bed, Sheila cuddled next to him.

She was beginning to doze when she realized she hadn't removed her makeup. She didn't want to be found dead the next morning with raccoon eyes.

She forced herself out of bed and trudged into the bathroom, each step feeling like a mile. She turned on the light, blinking against the glare, and groped her way to the sink. There on the mirror was pasted a new affirmation, in Lance's handwriting. Sheila's eyes wouldn't focus at first. She leaned her hands against the sink to support herself and looked closely at the piece of paper. Finally, despite her blurred vision, she was able to make out the words. *"When I get settled I will send for you. We can get married and have that kid now."*



DETECTIVERSE

THE LAW OF THE BUNGLE

by *HAZEL HART*

Joe overslept and, ten minutes late,
Arrived at the bank in a terrible state.
He went inside and drew his gun,
His mask fell off, and he started to run,
Stumbled to his car for his big getaway,
But ran out of gas five blocks away.
So now Joe's in prison doing time:
The payoff for his disorganized crime.

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a **NEW Ben Snow** story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Ben entered the sickroom, not knowing what to expect. The dull clatter of machinery, which he'd heard from outside, became more pronounced, and as the first cool air hit his face he saw a large cast-iron box about the shape of a coffin that almost filled one end of the bedroom. This was the source of both the sound and the air, and he'd never seen anything like it before.

Edward D. Hoch's Ben Snow stories have been receiving wide praise from EQMM readers. This one—about a bedridden rancher who has terrible nightmares about the horse that threw him and caused his injury—will not disappoint . . .

THE PHANTOM STALLION

by **EDWARD D. HOCH**

Because no one had need of his gun or his wits, Ben Snow had hired on as a temporary ranch hand one summer, working at the sprawling Six-Bar spread of Horace Grant in west Texas. Grant himself was a broken man in his seventies by this time, confined to bed in his room following a fall from a horse that had left him paralyzed. But he still approved all the hiring, and on Ben's first morning at the Six-Bar Ranch he was ushered into the old man's bedroom by Grant's eldest son Terry.

"Don't worry, it's just a formality," Terry Grant assured Ben. Terry was a husky man of around forty. Ben guessed he left most of the hard work to his younger brother. "This is probably the only time you'll see Dad all summer."

"Can't you take him out in a wheelchair?"

Terry Grant shook his head. "Not in the hot weather. In his con

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dition, he can't stand it. Breathing is an effort for him. That's why we rigged up this air-cooling device you'll see in his room. It's like the one they used in the White House after President Garfield was shot back in '81."

Ben entered the sickroom, not knowing what to expect. The dull clatter of machinery, which he'd heard from outside, became more pronounced, and as the first cool air hit his face he saw a large cast-iron box about the shape of a coffin that almost filled one end of the bedroom. This was the source of both the sound and the air, and he'd never seen anything like it before.

But his attention was immediately distracted by the figure in the bed—a gruff, white-haired old man who asked, "You come to see me or that gadget?"

"Dad, this here's Ben Snow, a new temporary hand I'd like to take on for a few weeks. Claims he's good with horses."

Horace Grant eyed Ben from beneath drooping lids. "Worked at any other ranches around here, Snow?"

"Not around here," Ben answered. "But you won't be disappointed in me." His attention wandered to the sunlit window that looked out across the valley. About a mile away an impressive structure that looked like an Italian villa was rising toward the sky. "Looks as if you're building a new ranch house over there. Don't see many houses that expensive around here."

"My sons are buildin' it for me," the old man answered proudly. "It's the one thing I want before I die. I always promised their mother I'd own a place like that. She didn't live to see it, but there it is, by God!"

Terry Grant cleared his throat. "What about it, Dad? Is it all right if we take Snow on for a few weeks?"

"Sure, sure—looks like a good man to me."

"Thank you, sir," Ben answered respectfully. "You won't be sorry."

They left the bedroom and Terry said, "I told you it was just a formality. He never turns anyone down, but we like him to feel he still has a say in the way things are run."

"It must be a terrible thing to be bedridden after such an active life."

"We try to keep him as comfortable as we can. My wife Lorrie brings all his meals to him, and my brother Silas and I rigged up that air-cooling gadget. It costs a fortune to operate, but it's worth it to keep him comfortable."

"How does it work?" Ben asked.

"We have blocks of ice brought out from town by the wagonload. That's the most expensive part. The ice is shaved and mixed with salt to form a sort of briny slush in the top of that iron tank. It trickles down onto terrycloth screens. A steam-driven electric generator powers a fan in the lower part of the tank. Warm air is sucked in from outside and cooled as it passes across the screens."

"There must be some way to muffle the noise of the fan. I'm sure President Garfield's machine didn't clatter like that."

"I believe it was in an adjoining room with a duct through the wall," Terry admitted. "But we couldn't do that because of the kitchen next door. My father insisted on a ground-floor room so he could oversee things, and that parlor was the only room we could convert to a bedroom."

Ben was studying the heavy drapes that hung on either side of the windows in the main living room. "If you don't mind a suggestion, some drapes like those, hung from ceiling to floor between the cooling machine and the bed, would muffle the sound and also cut down the size of the area to be cooled. You could run a duct through a hole in the drapes."

"What an excellent suggestion!" a voice behind Ben said. He turned to see a handsome woman in a fringed riding costume standing near the front door. "Who is this wise young man, Terry?"

"Ben Snow, a new temporary hand. Ben, I'd like you to meet my wife Lorrie. She runs the house, and anything she says here goes, just as if it came from me."

Lorrie Grant seemed a bit younger than her husband, probably in her mid-thirties. She had pale-blue eyes and when she removed her hat he saw she had blonde hair gathered into a bun at the back. "Pleased to be working here," he told her.

She eyed him for a moment and then addressed her husband. "Terry, if you'll loan me Mr. Snow for the remainder of the afternoon I think we could have that drape in place by suppertime."

"Go ahead," her husband said with a wave of his hand. "I have to ride out to the north pasture to see about the branding. You help my wife, Ben, and I'll show you around the place tomorrow."

When they were alone, Lorrie Grant bustled about, fetching a curtain rod from one room and some thick brown drapes from another.

"You from Texas, Mr. Snow?"

"Please call me Ben. I'm only an employee."

She laughed. "Sometimes I think that's all I am, too . . ."

Horace Grant was dozing when they started their task, but he came awake as Ben gently hammered the nails holding the curtain rod in place. "What—?" he mumbled. "It's that damned horse again!"

Lorrie Grant hurried to soothe him. "No, no—we're only putting up some drapes to make it quieter in here. Ranger is dead. He won't be coming here any more."

"What was that?" Ben asked when they'd finished putting up the drapes and returned to the living room.

"He dreams about Ranger, the stallion that threw him and caused his injury. Terry's brother Silas shot Ranger after the accident, but Horace still dreams about him, imagines him right in that room sometimes, rearing up and pounding the bed with his hoofs."

"I imagine he was a vigorous man in his younger days."

"He was."

"I see the new house they're building across the valley. At least he has that to think about."

Lorrie Grant looked away. "Yes, well, it's a long way from being finished. I think he wanted it mainly to have as big a place as Nathan Lee, who owns the Running-W ranch in the next town. They've been feuding and trying to top one another for as long as I've been in the family. Grant and Lee—it's like the Civil War all over again."

She walked around outside with Ben, pointing out some of the buildings around the main house.

"Where do I sleep?" he asked.

Lorrie glanced up at him. "In the bunkhouse. It's that long building over by the corral. Take it easy and you'll get along fine here. Don't try to rush things."

"I just do what I'm told," he said, reacting to her sudden coolness.

She took a step back. "Oh, and Ben—next time you're in the house, leave your gun belt outside. I don't like weapons in my home."

He tipped his hat politely and left her in silence.

For the rest of that first week, Ben worked mainly with Silas Grant, Terry's younger brother. He was a man in his early thirties, about Ben's age, and he handled himself well on a horse. If he lacked his brother's authoritative manner, he made up for it with a toughness that seemed to come naturally to him.

They spent their days riding the range, engaged in routine ranch chores like stringing barbed wire and rounding up strays. By the end of the week Silas had become more talkative and a bit more

friendly. "I still remember everything about that day Ranger threw my father," he said, getting out a chew of tobacco. "Terrible thing, terrible! Reared up and tried to trample him. I didn't think twice. Drew my Colt and blasted that beast right between the eyes. It was too late for my father, though."

"It saved his life."

"If you call that living—confined to a bed with only the view from a window to keep him company."

"You've made it comfortable for him, cooling the air—"

"That was a damned-fool idea of Terry's. Costs us a fortune, lugging that ice out from town."

Their conversation was interrupted by the sight of a lone horseman heading toward them across the range. "That one of our men?" Ben asked.

Silas dropped a hand to his pistol butt as if checking to see that it was in place. "Damned if it's not Nathan Lee! Come on!"

They spurred their horses to a gallop, with Ben falling back a little on his mount, Oats, to let Silas overtake the intruder first. When he rode up, Silas was sitting with his right hand on his gun. "A bit away from home, aren't you, Mr. Lee?"

Nathan Lee was a white-haired man in his sixties. His face had the weathered look of someone who'd spent his life on the range. "Looking for strays, like yourself. You know my brand, Silas. Seen any of the critters?"

"Not likely. Let us ride you back to the boundary line."

"I can find my own way."

Silas motioned to Ben. "See that Mr. Lee gets back to his own property, Ben. By the shortest route."

Ben did as he was ordered, riding silently at Nathan Lee's side for about a mile before the older man broke the silence. "You're new here, aren't you? I haven't seen you in town."

"Just temporary," Ben explained. "Earning a little money to tide me over."

"You wear your pistol like a gunfighter."

"No, not me," Ben assured him.

"I just wondered if old man Grant was bringing in hired guns to use against me."

"I wouldn't know about that. I'm just passing through."

They rode on a little farther. Far off to his left Ben could see the walls of the new villa. No one seemed to be working there today, but when he thought about it he realized he hadn't seen any workers

there all week. "What do you think of Grant's Folly?" Nathan Lee asked, motioning across the valley toward the villa.

"Horace Grant seems pleased with the way it's progressing," Ben answered cautiously.

"The fool would be," Lee replied with a chuckle. "He doesn't know what's going on right under his nose."

Ben left him at the boundary line, a meandering creek with a string of barbed wire along one bank. On the way back to the ranch house, he decided to detour for a closer look at the villa that was nearing completion. As he neared it, slowing Oats to a trot, he realized something was wrong. Coming at it from this angle, the fancy stone front of the place looked one-dimensional, like a stage setting.

And, once up to it, he saw it *was* a stage setting!

The stonework of the supposed villa had been painted on canvas, stretched upon a wooden frame that was held upright by wooden supports anchored to the ground. The whole thing was a fake, an illusion that appeared real from the one vantage point that mattered—the bedroom window that was Horace Grant's only view of the world.

Ben was still puzzling over his discovery when another rider approached. He saw that it was Paul Wooster, foreman of the ranch, a beady-eyed man with a knife scar on his left cheek. Ben hadn't yet worked with him, but they'd gotten to know each other during the long evenings in the bunkhouse.

"What you doin' over here, Snow? Snoopin' around?"

"I was riding with Silas Grant and we came upon Mr. Lee looking for strays. I escorted him off our land."

"I asked what you were doin' *here*."

"Thought I'd ride over and take a look. It's all painted canvas. It's a fake."

"And it's also none of your damned business! If you want to keep your job, keep your nose clean. Don't stick it where it don't belong. This here's a family matter."

"But Mr. Grant thinks—"

"Don't matter what he thinks. He can't live much longer and hey're just makin' his final days more pleasant. They put up that air-coolin' machine in his room and they put up this nice scene for him to look at. You forget you ever saw it close up. If Mr. Grant ever asks you, just say the place is almost finished. Understand?"

"Sure," Ben agreed. "I'm not here to make trouble . . ."

As the days passed, the summer heat increased. Ben found himself working on the range more often with Paul Wooster and the others. He saw little of the Grant brothers and nothing at all of Lorrie Grant. Sometimes at night in the crowded bunkhouse, he thought of her while Wooster told stories of knife fights with Mexicans along the Rio Grande.

Ben had worked at the Six-Bar for two weeks when Lorrie Grant summoned him to the main house one morning. A new wagonload of ice had arrived from town and she needed someone to shave and shovel it into the machine in Horace's bedroom. "Do you like it here?" she asked him as he went about the task.

"It's a good job."

"Silas thinks you're a gunfighter hiding out from something. He even thinks you might be Billy the Kid."

"Billy the Kid's been dead over ten years."

"Still, people hear stories."

She helped him refill the machine. She was wearing workpants, with a shirt tucked in at the waist. Horace Grant was asleep in his bed, snoring gently as they worked.

"How's he been?" Ben asked.

Lorrie shrugged. "Not so good. He dreamed about his horse again last night, woke up screaming that Ranger was in the room with him, trampling him."

Ben glanced out at the distant villa. "How's the new house coming?"

She shot him a look. "You know better than I do. I heard you were over there last week."

"I was riding by."

When they'd finished loading the ice in the top of the machine, she said, "That duct through the curtain is coming loose. Could you tighten the supporting arm?"

"Sure."

It was easy to fix and took only a few minutes. He joined her in the living room. "All fixed now. Anything else you want me to do around here?"

She seemed to weigh his words and her reply before she answered. "You've been very helpful. I may call upon you again soon."

"Any time."

He went out to the corral where Terry Grant was breaking in a new horse. Until now, Ben hadn't seen the older brother do much in the way of physical labor, but he showed his strength in keeping

the big stallion under control. Finally, Terry climbed down and turned the horse over to one of the cowhands. He came over to the fence and asked Ben. "Did you help Lorrie out?"

"All finished. We loaded the cooler with more shaved ice."

Later in the day, when Ben and Terry returned from checking fences, Lorrie told them, "Horace says he's feeling better. He'd like to come out in the wheelchair."

"It's too hot for that," Terry replied abruptly. "It would kill him."

"That's what I said, but he's serious. And he wants us take him in the buggy to see the villa tomorrow."

Terry cursed under his breath. "We'll talk about it tonight."

It was past midnight when Ben was awakened by an unaccustomed sound. As his eyes became adjusted to the dark, he saw Paul Wooster slip out of the bunkhouse door and walk quickly across the yard to the barn. Ben was almost back asleep when he heard him return about an hour later and wondered what he'd been up to.

The following morning Ben helped Lorrie fill the machine with shaved ice again. About an hour later, as he was working by the stable, he saw Nathan Lee ride up the road. Neither of the brothers was in sight, so Ben strolled over to intercept him. "Can I help you, Mr. Lee?"

"I came to see Horace. I think you men are stealing my calves!"

"We're not—"

"Take me to Horace Grant!" His friendliness of their previous encounter had vanished.

"I can't do that, sir."

Lee dismounted his horse and headed on foot toward the stable. Ben flipped the horse's reins around a fencepost and ran toward the house.

"What is it?" Lorrie asked, seeing him appear in the doorway.

"Nathan Lee rode over here to see Horace—Mr. Grant. He's out at the stable."

"He can't see him. It's out of the question. He's resting now. If I wake him up he'll want to go outside."

"All right. I'll tell him."

But Lee wasn't in the stable. Nobody was. Ben circled the corral and saw that his horse was still there, but there was no sign of its rider. Then he saw Lorrie in the doorway of the ranch house, motioning to him.

"What's the matter?" he asked, running toward her.

"There was a noise in his room and he called out. He may have been dreaming again, but I can't get the door open. It's stuck or something."

Ben went to the door and tried the knob. It turned but the door wouldn't open. "It seems to be locked," Ben said.

"Now I'm worried. Do you think we should break in?"

Ben hesitated. "Where are Silas and your husband?"

"Heaven knows—they could be at the other end of the range!"

"Stay here," he decided. "I'll go around and look in the window."

The earth around the back of the house was soft and sandy, and Ben found himself unconsciously checking it for footprints. There were none—only the tracks of a small prairie dog had disturbed the earth. He boosted himself up to the window, saw it was latched from the inside, and stared at the bed in which Horace Grant lay. He was half uncovered and his head rested at an odd angle. Beyond the bed, Ben could see that the only door was latched on the inside.

He smashed the window with the butt of his gun, unlatched it, and raised it high enough to crawl through. One look at Horace Grant's face told him he was dead. The side of his head had been crushed and the imprint of a bloody horseshoe was clearly visible.

Ben drew his .45 again and looked around stepping quickly to the drapery that hid the air-cooling machine from view. He pulled it aside, but there was no one behind it. The room was empty except for Ben and the dead man. He went to the door and examined the latch without touching it. A little lip ran down along the frame—it was impossible that it could have been locked from outside. He opened it carefully and faced Lorrie, blocking her view of the bed.

"What is it?" she asked, the terror plain on her face.

"He's dead. Someone or something crushed his skull."

"My God!"

Ben rubbed his slightly damp fingers together. "It might have been a horseshoe, from the look of the wound."

"The phantom stallion that haunted his dream? It couldn't have been Ranger!"

"You'd better go find your husband and Silas."

She noticed the gun in his hand for the first time. "What's that for?"

"Nathan Lee is still prowling around somewhere and I want to find him."

"Do you think *he* killed Horace?"

"Someone did."

She looked beyond him, seeing the bed and the broken pane.
"Ranger—"

"Forget the horse. This door was latched on the inside. Horace was paralyzed and it certainly wasn't latched by a dead horse from his dreams."

"Then how was it latched? And if the window was locked, too, how did the killer get out?"

"I don't know," Ben admitted, "but I'm going to find out."

He located Lee near the holding corral out behind the big barn, deep in conversation with Paul Wooster. "You'd both better get up to the main house," he told them. "Horace Grant's been killed."

"Killed?" For a moment Lee didn't seem to comprehend. "What do you mean?"

"It looks like murder."

Wooster turned on Lee. "You're the only enemy he had around these parts, Mr. Lee. I'd hate to think you'd gun down a paralyzed old man."

"I didn't."

"He wasn't gunned down," Ben explained. "His skull was crushed by a blow from a horseshoe. An easy enough weapon to find around here. Who does your blacksmithing, Paul?"

Wooster scratched his head. "We generally take the horses into town when they need work, but some of the boys can drive a nail if we have to. I've done it myself."

On the way back to the ranch house, Ben fell into step beside the foreman and asked him quietly, "How long were you with Lee?"

"Only a few minutes. I saw him nosin' around and asked what he was doing."

"What was he doing?"

"Seeing who he could hire away from us to work the Running-W. Hell, I think he was even making me an offer, but he didn't come right out and say it."

Ben nodded. "Almost as if he knew Horace Grant was dead."

Terry and Silas Grant had both reached the house by the time Ben and the others arrived. A few of the cowhands were there, too, and the cook. Terry had taken charge, ordering someone to ride into town for the sheriff. Silas stood to one side. Ben was surprised to see he'd been crying.

"I guess we can tear down our canvas villa now," he said with a trace of bitterness. "There's no one left to fool."

Terry looked at him. "Was that meant for me?"

"It was your idea, wasn't it?"

"Only to keep him happy in his last months, to make him think we were building the house he always wanted."

"How could you know they were his last months? Maybe you helped him along with that talk of phantom stallions!"

Terry looked as if he might hit his younger brother. "The horse was in his dreams! I had nothing to do with it!" He saw that Nathan Lee was anxious to leave and turned his attention to him. "You were trespassing on our land," he pointed out, "and while you were here my father was killed. Now you'll just have to wait and answer some questions when the sheriff gets here."

Lee shoved his restraining hand away. "If I wanted to kill your father I had plenty of opportunities—and with a six-gun out on the range, not sneaking around here and beating him to death on his sick-bed. Who'd want to murder a dying man, anyway?"

Ben thought it was a good question. He remembered the old man's desire to go outside in his wheelchair. Had someone feared he'd discover the distant villa was only a stage set?

Sheriff Long, when he arrived, proved to be an aging man with a tired expression. "I knew old Horace like my own kin," he said sadly. "Sorry to see him go this way."

He listened to the details of the scene, and to Ben's account of breaking into the room.

"What do you think, Sheriff?" Terry Grant asked him.

"Death by misadventure, I guess. Hell, maybe that damned horse did kill him."

Terry appeared dumfounded. "In a locked room?"

"I was thinkin' maybe that blow to his head happened when the horse threw him, and the wound just now appeared when he died."

Even Silas wouldn't accept that. "I'd believe in a ghost horse before I'd believe that."

"What about Nathan Lee?" Terry argued. "He hated my father, and everyone in the county knows it. He was on our land today without permission and—"

"I'll question him," the sheriff agreed. He took Lee into the dining room and sat down with him. They were out of earshot, but Ben had already guessed from his manner that he had no intention of antagonizing another big landowner in his district.

Terry and Lorrie went about making funeral arrangements and Ben drifted out to the corral. No one had asked him to help with the case. They didn't need him. Maybe it was time to think about moving on.

There was grumbling in the bunkhouse that night. The men were worried about getting paid. They feared a power struggle between Terry and Silas, and they talked about the offers Nathan Lee had made to some of them. A few were tempted to bolt to the Running-W, but that sort of talk ceased quickly when Paul Wooster walked in. The foreman looked troubled by the day's events and said little, though when Ben approached him with a routine question about the following morning's work he answered readily enough.

"Everything will go on as usual, Ben, you can count on it. The funeral's in two days and we'll all be there, of course, but otherwise we'll be out on the range doing our job."

"What about Lee's offer?"

"To hell with Lee!"

That night, after twelve, Wooster left the bunkhouse again. This time Ben slipped on his pants and boots and followed the foreman through the starry darkness across the corral area to the barn. He hadn't brought a gun, and he hoped he wouldn't regret it. But as soon as he slipped into the barn behind Wooster he knew he wouldn't need a weapon. He heard Lorrie's soft voice saying, "I didn't know if you'd come tonight."

"Why? Because the old man got himself killed? The shape he was in, it was more like a mercy killing. Nothin' to grieve over."

"Terry and Silas were fighting again after the sheriff left."

"Don't worry, your husband knows how to handle baby brother."

"My husband—"

"That's what he is. You ain't about to leave him."

"No," she admitted.

"Come here."

Ben saw their figures merge in the darkness. Then he slipped back outside through the partly open door, thankful for the brightness of the sky that guided him to the bunkhouse.

In the morning, Silas Grant came out to the bunkhouse during breakfast to tell Wooster that the canvas villa should be taken down. "Get rid of it today," he ordered. "I don't want to look at it any more."

"All right," the foreman said.

Ben caught up with Silas as he walked toward his horse. "Will you still be needing me?" he asked.

"Sure. Why not? My brother hired you, not my father." He lifted himself into the saddle and headed toward a work party of cowhands who were awaiting him.

Ben stayed around the bunkhouse, figuring that Wooster would need help taking down the painted canvas, but it was Lorrie who finally came looking for him. "We don't need the cooling machine any more," she said. "Would you help me empty it?"

The fan had been shut off and the big machine was silent for the first time since Ben's arrival. He lifted the lid of the coffinlike compartment where the shaved ice was loaded and found something unexpected.

It was a length of wood with a bloody horseshoe loosely nailed to one end. "What's that?" Lorrie asked.

"The murder weapon, unless I'm mistaken."

Lorrie gasped, putting her hand to her mouth.

Ben lifted it out carefully. "There's your phantom stallion, about as I'd expected."

"Of course," Lorrie said. "After he killed Horace, the murderer hid in the top of the tank, in the ice compartment. There's room enough for a body. When we went for help, he slipped out, either through the front door or the window you'd raised."

Ben glanced out the broken window at the soft earth below, but Sheriff Long and the brothers had all been back there and the ground had been trampled now by too many footprints to yield any clues. "He was right here in the room with us all the time," Ben grumbled, "and we let him escape."

"But who?"

"Wooster told me he occasionally does some shoeing. I found him with Lee, but he said they'd only been together a few minutes. That leaves both of them without alibis." He watched her face for a reaction to the mention of the foreman's name, but there was none.

"What will you do?" she asked. "Tell the sheriff?"

"First I'd like to have another talk with Wooster." Ben knew that whatever he found out, it might endanger his job at the ranch, but he left the house and mounted Oats, riding off across the valley in the direction of the canvas villa. He could see men working there and assumed the foreman was one of them. As he neared the spot, he left his horse and approached on foot, keeping one hand near his

gun. Up close, the painted villa had a dead, unreal look that would have fooled no one. But the sons had always known their father wouldn't see it up close.

"Wooster!" he called out. "Are you here?"

Suddenly a large piece of canvas seemed to come loose in the breeze, as if freed by some unseen hand, and Paul Wooster's large grey stallion appeared, running directly toward Ben. He had to throw himself out of the way to avoid been trampled.

"You all right?" Wooster called out, seeing what had happened.

Ben picked himself up, brushing the dirt from his clothes. "I'll live."

Wooster gave a whistle to summon his horse back. "Sorry. We were unhitching the canvas from those wooden supporting poles and the space was too confined. There wasn't enough room. When that canvas came loose, Runner just broke away from me. I was usin' him to help me reach the high places, to pull the nails out."

"Not enough room," Ben repeated.

"Yeah. You sure you're all right, Snow?"

"I'm all right."

"Then give me a hand here. I need your help."

But Ben ignored him and went back to his horse. There was something he had to do. With Wooster shouting after him, he headed Oats back toward the ranch house.

As he entered, Lorrie came out of the kitchen. There may have been something about his expression that told her he knew the truth before he asked, "Why did you kill that old man, Mrs. Grant?"

She stared at him, her hands working nervously. "I couldn't have killed him. The door was latched from the inside. And the killer was hiding in the air-cooling machine."

"No, I'd filled that compartment with shaved ice only an hour or so earlier. There wouldn't have been room for anyone to hide in there."

"The door was latched from the inside," she repeated.

"Easiest thing in the world to arrange. After you beat him to death with that horseshoe, you hid the club in the air-cooler and took out a tiny piece of the shaved ice. You used it to prop up the latch as you closed the door. After a minute or two the ice melted and the latch dropped into place, locking the door from the inside."

Her face had gone deathly pale. "Even if that's what happened, anyone could have done it. Why me?"

"Because it didn't make sense for anyone but the killer to lock that door in the first place. The whole idea of the horseshoe must have been to give the crime a supernatural air, to tie in with Horace's dreams everyone had heard about. But latching the door defeated the whole purpose. Neither a paralyzed man nor a ghost horse could have locked it, so why was it locked? Who benefited by it being latched like that? Only you, Mrs. Grant, because you were the one on the other side of that door. You would have had the best opportunity to kill Horace Grant if that door was unlatched. Anyone else—your husband, your brother-in-law, your foreman, or even Nathan Lee—would have left it open."

"Suppose the killer heard me coming after he'd struck the blow and latched the door so I wouldn't walk in on the murder scene? Have you thought of that?"

"Yes," Ben answered with a touch of sadness. "If that was the case, the killer would have fled when you left the house to summon me. He wouldn't have stayed trapped in there with his victim."

"I—" Her voice faltered and broke. She'd run out of arguments.

"Why did you kill him?" he asked again. "It was because of Paul Wooster, wasn't it?"

"You know about that?"

Ben nodded.

She sighed. "I spoke to Paul the other day in Horace's room, like I did with you. I thought the old man was asleep. But he heard us and he threatened to tell Terry. It would have ruined our marriage. I couldn't risk that for a few hours with a sweaty ranch foreman. I think I did the old man a favor, anyway. He wanted to die."

"Not like that, he didn't," Ben assured her. "A pillow over his face might have been merciful, but not a horseshoe nailed to a piece of wood."

A sly look came into the pale-blue eyes. "Maybe I thought that would point to one of the cowhands."

"Like your lover, Paul Wooster? He'd have gotten that horseshoe nailed on more firmly. The job you did showed inexperience in nailing horseshoes."

Neither of them had been aware of Terry Grant, who'd entered the house as they talked. He stepped forward then, and the sight of him was the final blow to his wife. She collapsed, sobbing, against his shoulder.

"I'll handle things now," he told Ben. "Gather your gear together and get a move on. I'll pay you through the end of next week."

"Shouldn't the sheriff be told?"

"I'll handle that."

Ben left the ranch within the hour with his wages and headed north.

He never saw any of them again, and it was only the following spring, at a bar in Durango, that someone told him of the shooting at the Six-Bar ranch and how Terry Grant had gunned down his wife and his foreman before taking his own life.

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here's what's left of Cecil Shanks,
Adept at robbing rural banks.
He'd robbed a bank in a southern town
When his faithful getaway car broke down,
And Cecil, in place of his usual romp,
Had to head instead for the nearby swamp
Afoot and toting his bag of loot,
With the cops and bloodhounds in hot pursuit.
He soon attained the welcoming shades
Of the damp and gloomy Everglades,
And he might have made his escape somehow
When suddenly blocked by an open slough
Whose water seemed very deep to him
For Cecil had never learned to swim.
The slough, however, was not so wide
(Fourteen feet from side to side),
So Cecil leaped to a fallen log
As a stepping stone to cross the bog,
And learned, alas, but a moment later,
The fallen log was an alligator.

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a **NEW** short story by

PETER LOVESEY

Donna hadn't noticed anyone else in the photo until Jamie pointed him out. To the right of the gravel path, partly in shadow, was a garden seat. On it, a youngish man in a tan-colored bomber jacket had turned in an obvious way to look at Donna as she posed.

*She commented modestly, "He's probably looking at the palace."
"I wouldn't bet on it," said Jamie . . .*

THE STARING MAN

by **PETER LOVESEY**

When she returned from the honeymoon, Donna took two rolls of film to a shop in Kensington High Street that printed them the same day. She was dying to see herself in all the exquisite clothes Jamie had bought for her in Vienna. There were traditional Austrian dirndls and a dazzling selection of designer suits and dresses from the big-name couturiers in the Graben. Thoughtfully, she had traveled light. All she had taken on the honeymoon apart from jeans, T-shirts, and underclothes was the Sonia Rykiel gown that she had been married in, a gorgeous cerise-colored creation. It might have been made for her. Jamie would never know it was from the Nearl New Shop in Fulham Palace Road.

She collected the photos and slid them from the package as soon as she was out of the shop. The first few were taken on the steps of Kensington Registry Office. Just a handful of friends. Donna would have liked the full works: a pony and trap to the Parish Church, bridesmaids, Mendelssohn, and Jamie in a grey top hat. But she could never have afforded it herself, and she refused to ask her appalling mother to foot the bill. Jamie, who was certainly capable

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of writing a check, had been through a church wedding once before, and had gently pressed for a civil ceremony this time. Donna had gracefully given way. She hadn't been prepared to make an issue of it. She had her priorities, and number one was to land her catch.

The first of the Vienna pictures. The Figaro House where Mozart had lived. Obviously they had not found the dress shops at that stage because she was still in bluejeans. A pity. The narrow street with its somber greys and greens would have been a perfect backdrop for the crimson dirndl and white blouse that Jamie had bought her later that afternoon.

Absorbed, she worked her way through the prints, assessing her outfits and finding them mostly as elegant as when she had tried them on. She was slightly disappointed that Jamie had taken so many pictures of buildings, but she hardly glanced at those, except one of the front of the hotel in which she was waving from their bedroom window. It had been lunchtime, she remembered, and she was still in the pale-blue-silk nightie he had draped across her pillow as a surprise the previous evening. She smiled at the recollection. He was captivated by her. He had woken her every morning with a kiss and a caress. They hadn't eaten a single breakfast in the two weeks.

She looked through the photos several times more that afternoon. It was partly self-congratulation, but there was something else. She was looking for reassurance. She had not been entirely honest with Jamie. The truth couldn't be hidden from him much longer.

She showed him the pictures after dinner that evening. They now lived in Jamie's beautiful Georgian riverside house at Strand on the Green, near Kew Bridge. He had already asked his solicitor to make Donna the co-owner. Jamie believed marriage was a partnership in every respect. On Friday, they had an appointment with his bank manager to open a joint account.

He reached for her waist and pulled her onto his lap on the sofa in front of the real-flame gas-fire. She picked the photos off the ceramic-tiled table nearby and started going through them, holding them for Jamie to inspect. He was nibbling her earlobe.

"Pay attention, lover-boy," she chided him lightly. "I gave up my lunch to collect these for you today. I want to show them to you."

He touched his lips to hers. "You can show me anything you like." "Jamie!"

He pretended to take an intelligent interest in the photos, reaching to take one out of her hand. "That's come out well."

"My Italian suit?"

"The entire picture. The way the trees line up, giving that wedge of sky on the right. It makes an interesting composition. The park at Schönbrunn, isn't it?"

"I don't remember," said Donna, and she might have added that she didn't care.

"Obviously you made a strong impression on someone."

She perked up. "The cameraman?"

"I meant the guy on the seat."

She hadn't noticed anyone else in the picture. She took it back to look. To the right of the gravel path, partly in shadow, was a garden seat. On it, a youngish man in a tan-colored bomber jacket had turned in an obvious way to look at Donna as she posed.

She commented modestly, "He's probably looking at the palace."

"I wouldn't bet on it."

She turned to the next pictures, a series of shots Jamie had taken on the Fiaker tour. They had sat side by side in the carriage and he had snapped his camera at each old building the driver had pointed out. She didn't say so, but she thought he might just as well have bought a set of postcards.

There was one picture at the end, when she had posed with the driver in his brown bowler and grey-velvet jacket that handsomely set off her peacock-blue.

"There he is again—the same bloke!" said Jamie.

"The driver?"

"No, silly. The guy in the other picture. Look, he's there in the background, leaning against the scaffolding beside the Stephansdom."

Donna studied the picture. "It's just someone wearing a similar jacket."

"No, look at his face. Where's the first picture?"

They compared them. Certainly the two jackets were identical and the faces looked similar, pale in color with gaunt cheeks and deep-set, shadowy eyes. In each picture, they were fixed on Donna.

"Your secret admirer," said Jamie.

"I hope not. He looks weird to me. Anyway, I've got an admirer."

"And he doesn't make a secret of it," murmured Jamie, sliding his hand over her left knee.

She let the photographs drop on the carpet.

After they had made love on the sofa, they drank iced Perrier

water. Donna decided that if any moment was going to be right for a confession, this was it. "Darling, I haven't been entirely honest with you. I feel very ashamed. I'd like to tell you about it."

"Don't worry, angel," he answered with consideration. "If it's about the past, forget it. I'm a realist. I can't believe someone as pretty as you would have got to twenty-four without experience."

"That isn't what I mean, Jamie." She looked into his confident blue eyes and prepared to see them swivel with amazement. "I married you under false pretenses. All that stuff I told you about working as a company director in the family business wasn't true. I'm an out-of-work actress. When I go up to town, I don't really go to work in the City, I do the rounds of the theatrical agencies."

Jamie smiled and squeezed her hand. "Darling, that's nothing to be ashamed of! I'd much rather be married to an actress than a boring old company director."

"My family isn't in business. We don't have a country house in Wiltshire," she went on, determined to clean the slate. "Daddy wasn't a Master of Fox-Hounds, he was a tobacconist in Balham High Street. When I was twelve, he had an affair with one of the girls from the supermarket across the street. My mother divorced him and went to live in Scotland."

"I married you, my sweet, not your parents," Jamie pointed out with durable good humor.

"Yes, but you still don't know the truth about me. My cottage in Devon doesn't exist. I invented it to impress you. I don't have any furniture of my own. I've lived in furnished accommodations since left school."

"School? You mean Cambridge University?"

She sighed. "Darling, that was another fabrication. I feel so terrible telling you all this. I didn't go to public school or university. I was at a tin-pot drama school that didn't even put us in for CSEs. All I got there was a plummy accent from the elocution lessons. It didn't even get me any parts worth having. It simply fitted me for what I am—a con-artist." She lowered her eyes. The penitent look was something else she had learned in drama school.

Jamie had let go of her hand. He was sinking under the torrent of revelations, but slowly. He was still thinking about the cottage in Devon. "You don't possess any property, then?" he said slowly. "Nothing at all?"

"Not a brick. That's what I'm trying to tell you, Jamie. I'm a

wicked liar. I wanted you so much that I lied through my teeth to get you."

She watched him with wide, fearful eyes. In her mind, she had acted out this scene a dozen or more times and endured every kind of retribution from obloquy to a physical beating.

He said in a voice that was still struggling to come to terms with what he had been told, "But we agreed to share everything—our property, our money, everything."

"Yes. And I have nothing except the few things I moved in with."

"But you have some money of your own. We agreed to open a joint account. Surely you have a bank account?"

"An overdraft," admitted Donna, thankful that she had found the courage to tell him everything.

The color had drained entirely from Jamie's face. He stared into the fire for a long time.

Donna moved closer to him and said, "I love you. I lied because I love you. I could see you were unhappy living alone and I wanted you for myself."

The last statement was true. She had met Jamie through an escort agency. It was a classy place that employed a lot of actresses between shows. They treated you like the Civil Service and sex was definitely not in the contract. The clients were mostly wealthy businessmen like Jamie, who needed to socialize and paid everything with Diners and American Express. When Donna had filled in her form with a couple of other girls she knew from drama school, it had all seemed a huge joke, and she had laughingly invented posh parents and a cottage in the country. But when she had met Jamie, the joke was over. He wasn't fat and middle-aged, like most of the clients—he was the most eligible man she had ever met, tall, twenty-seven, good-looking, and, above all, rich! He was a widower, and it was practically written all over him that he was desperate to marry again.

She wondered whether this was the moment to sway toward him and solicit a forgiving kiss. His blitzed look was not encouraging.

He said in an expressionless voice, "I think I'll go to bed."

Donna decided that the appropriate action for a remorseful wife was to remain downstairs and spend the night on the sofa. A few hours' sleep would probably bring Jamie round.

She washed in the kitchen and fetched a car-blanket from the Mercedes. She would sleep in her underclothes tonight.

While she was arranging the blanket, the bare sole of her foot touched something cold on the carpet—one of the honeymoon photographs. She picked it up. It was a flashbulb shot taken in one of the wine-gardens—what did the Viennese call them? *Heurigen*? She was in the sweet little black number with the *diamanté* brooch and the reckless plunge. With her long blonde hair, she always looked stunning in black. That evening people had turned to stare as she had walked among the scrubbed pinewood tables. She hadn't imagined it—they were there in the photograph casting sideward glances at her. One, she now noticed, looked remarkably like the guy in the tan-colored jacket in those other pictures. But this one was in a dark-brown suit.

Well, Donna told herself, he wouldn't wear the same thing all the time, would he?

She had to be sure. She went to the sideboard drawer and took out the magnifying glass Jamie kept there. She examined the photo minutely.

It was him. It was definitely him, that washed-out, cadaverous face, those hollow eyes, watching her. She shuddered. Even here in the security of her new home, she felt creepy. He must have been following her around Vienna. How else could he have appeared in three photographs taken in different places? A pulse was beating on her forehead.

Suddenly, irrationally, she felt afraid to spend the night downstairs alone. She pulled the blanket around her shoulders and hurried up to their bedroom without even turning out the light.

In bed, she pressed close to Jamie's broad back and the fears receded.

He said, "Are you all right? You're shaking."

She didn't tell him the reason. It would have seemed like a cheap bid for affection. Naturally, he was still brooding over her deceit. He murmured, "It's a reaction, I expect. Darling, will you forgive me?"

He was silent for an agonizing interval before he said, "At least you had the decency to tell me the truth."

"You were bound to find out soon," admitted Donna. "I should have told you before the wedding, but I was so afraid of losing you."

"As it happens, I haven't been entirely frank myself," Jamie unexpectedly volunteered. "There's something I've been keeping from

you. You've been honest with me, so I want to clear my own conscience. I didn't tell you the whole truth about Fiona."

"Your wife?"

He turned onto his back. "Yes. I told you she died. I didn't tell you the circumstances."

"There's no need, my darling," Donna assured him.

"Yes, you ought to know." He hesitated. "You see, Fiona was murdered."

She caught her breath. "How?"

He answered in a voice that was low, but determined to recite the facts. "Someone strangled her. It was while I was in Paris on a business trip. I think I told you that I have to go there periodically to visit our sales rep there. Someone broke into the house in the night and strangled my poor Fiona with a length of flex. I found her when I got back on the Sunday night."

"Oh, Jamie! Who?"

"They never found out. There was no reason why anyone should have wanted to kill Fiona. She wasn't the sort to make enemies. She was sweet-natured, loved by everyone who knew her."

"Was she—?"

"Sexually assaulted? No. And the motive wasn't theft, because nothing was taken. We had some beautiful things around the house. Pictures, silver, antiques. Her family were very well off. I wouldn't be living in this style if it weren't for Fiona, poor darling. They questioned me, of course. I suppose if you think coldly in terms of a motive, I had one. I certainly profited from her death. But I was in Paris from Friday night until Sunday. They checked with British Airways and the hotel and found it was true."

"So who could have done it?"

"Nobody knows. They went through her diaries, questioned her friends, the neighbors, her family. It's a mystery. God knows, I've tried to think of an explanation. I think her family still feel it would never have happened if she hadn't married me."

"Poor Jamie! That's unfair."

"But understandable. There have been times when I've wondered whether the killer had some grudge against me."

Donna frowned. "He hated you so much that he strangled your wife? It doesn't sound very plausible."

"Doesn't it? In business, you make enemies sometimes without knowing it, people whose ambitions you frustrate, people who regard you as a threat or a menace."

"Is there anyone you suspect?"

"No one. That's just the point. It could be someone I didn't even know I had crossed. I try not to think about it now. I could easily get paranoid. Do you understand?"

"I understand. And I'm glad you told me, darling," said Donna, and she smiled in the darkness. Her own unscrupulous conduct seemed of less importance now.

No more was said that night. She drifted into sleep without giving another thought to the man in the photographs.

Next morning, they went to some trouble to behave considerably to each other. If the revelations on each side had tested the relationship, at least there were indications that they both wanted it to prosper. Jamie announced that he would clear Donna's overdraft and still open the joint account. Donna put up her hair in the style he liked best and promised him a candlelit dinner when he got home. He kissed her before he left for work.

The fears of the previous night seemed trivial as she went about the house that morning. She picked the rest of the photographs off the living-room floor and put them in their wallet without looking at them again. She had more important things on her mind, such as which dress to wear that evening.

After lunch, she walked into Kew to the butcher who sold the best steaks and bought two large fillets. At the chemist's next door, she picked up a new lipstick and a musky perfume she hadn't tried before. She had always envied women with enough money to treat themselves to whichever luxuries they fancied.

She strolled back in the autumn sunshine, stopping for a moment by the bridge to watch an eight at practice on the Thames. Their house overlooked the river, and all the activity on it was a happy discovery for Donna.

She was still watching the oarsmen as she approached the house. They appeared to be heading straight for a group of ducks, but she need not have worried. The ducks judged their escape to perfection, without even seeming to hurry. She was so wrapped up in this drama that she failed to notice the figure standing on the embankment opposite the house until she was within a few yards of him.

"Darling, I almost passed out on the spot," she told Jamie that evening as soon as he came in. "It was him—the man in the photographs. He stared at me just like he did in Vienna. He was standing

outside the house as if he was waiting for me. It was horrible! My blood ran cold. I walked past him, past the house, trying to pretend I didn't live here."

"And when you came back, he had gone?"

Donna's eyes filled with tears. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"How could it be the same fellow? Why?"

"I don't know, but I'm not mistaken. I don't imagine things."

"Of course you don't, but you must admit that you overreacted a little when you looked at the photos. He made a strong impression on you. The image stays in the mind, and next time you see a thin-faced guy near the house—"

"It isn't *like* that, Jamie! It was him! I know it was him!"

Over dinner, Jamie tried a different tack. "Okay, let's accept for a moment that you're not mistaken. He was the same guy. There's no reason to feel afraid. He hasn't threatened you, has he?"

"I feel threatened."

"Because it's all in your mind."

"No!"

"After dinner, we'll take another look at the photos, and I think you'll find you've made a mistake."

"I burned them in the grate this afternoon. I couldn't bear to have them in the house."

"Our honeymoon pictures?"

As a romantic occasion, the meal was already a disaster. They drank the wine and Jamie ate his steak, but Donna pushed her plate aside. She couldn't stomach food in her present state of mind. She went off to make coffee.

"By the way," Jamie said when she returned, "I think I told you that I have to make the occasional trip to Paris to confer with our rep over there. He's asked me over next weekend to meet some clients."

"You're going to Paris?" she said in disbelief.

"Don't look so alarmed, darling. It's strictly business, I assure you. I'll be back on Sunday night."

"Take me with you, Jamie."

"That won't be possible. Company policy. Wives don't go on business trips."

"To hell with the company! You can't leave me here alone after what's happened!"

"Nothing has happened."

"I shall go out of my mind!"

"You're being melodramatic, Donna."

"How can you contemplate a trip like this after what happened to your first wife?"

"Come now, that's unfair. What am I supposed to do? Give up my job altogether?"

Donna said, "They never found Fiona's killer. What if it were the man who watches me?"

"That's crazy! Why should it be him?"

"You said yourself it was possible he killed her because he had a grudge against you. He might be planning to murder me."

"Donna, you're overwrought. We've been through a heavy time together. Why don't you see the doctor in the morning and get some tranquilizers? In a couple of days you'll feel entirely different. By Friday, you won't care a damn about my Paris trip. Listen, I've had a good idea. You could go up to Harrod's on Saturday and buy yourself something exciting to wear when I come home. They stock some very exotic underwear."

"I'd rather have it from Paris, thank you."

"All right, I'll see what I can bring back for you."

He was intractable. The next morning, he drove her to the doctor's. She was given some capsules and a lecture about the stress of the first few months of marriage. She had already decided not to take the tranquilizers. If she saw the staring man again, she didn't want Jamie telling her she was muzzy.

But she didn't see him, and by Friday she was more or less reconciled to spending the weekend alone in the house. She had told herself sternly that she would have to face it sometime. When she was over the first weekend, she would feel less anxious about any others.

He was booked on the 5:15 P.M. Air France flight from Heathrow and Donna drove him there in the Mercedes after she had confessed to flushing all the tranquilizers down the toilet. He was amused rather than angry. He seemed pleased that she had conquered the fears herself.

Before he left her at the gate for United Kingdom passport-holders, he embraced her and told her where to locate the brandy in case she needed it for her nerves.

She answered that she wouldn't need it now. As he moved toward the ticket check, she called out, "Jamie!"

He turned. "Yes?"

"Don't get black, will you? White or pale-yellow."

"Oh!" He smiled, blushed, and went through the gate.

As Donna turned away, she looked into the eyes of the staring man. He had been standing within a yard of her. This time there could be no doubt. It was the skull-like face of the photographs, the cavernous eyes, the sallow coloring.

She blurted out, "Who are you?"

Furrows of apparent surprise formed on the high forehead. "I beg your pardon?"

"What do you want? Why have you been following me?"

He shook his head. "I think you are mistaken." He backed away and she quickly lost sight of him among the crowd around the departure gate.

For a moment she considered running after Jamie to tell him, but the security people on the gate would never have let her through. She might have asked to have his name called over the public-address system, but what was the use? The man was gone now and Jamie would say she had imagined it.

She had not imagined it. She was trembling and she had to find a place to sit down, but she was sane. She had to hold onto her sanity, her certainty that she wasn't mistaken.

After a while, she had a coffee and then drove home. Along the motorway, she weighed the possibility of moving into a hotel for the weekend. Jamie would laugh when he got back, but he could well afford the cost. He would probably charge it to the company.

The other prospect was to sit at home in the terrifying knowledge that the staring man knew she was alone in the house.

She decided to go home, collect her night-clothes and a couple of paperbacks, and then drive back and check in at the Post House, the hotel near the airport. She would spend the next two nights there and meet Jamie when he flew in on Sunday evening.

Just before Junction 2, the Kew exit, she glanced in the rearview mirror and noticed a black Volvo trailing her quite closely. In the twilight, she couldn't see much of the driver. She took the right turn under the elevated section, down Lionel Road, past the station and briefly into Kew Bridge Road before turning into Strand on the Green. The Volvo was still close behind.

Her garage entrance was electronically controlled. She turned onto the drive, pressed the remote control, and drove swiftly inside. The door closed behind her. She had intended leaving the car outside while she fetched her things, but that would have meant entering

the house by the front door and possibly being intercepted between the car and the house. Once inside the garage, she used the interior door to enter the kitchen. She ran into the front room and watched the street from behind the curtain.

The Volvo was drawing up outside. She still couldn't see the driver properly. He was apparently content to sit at the wheel of his car. But only for a minute. The door swung open. Donna drew back nervously into the shadows, but the street-lamp gave her a clear view of the man as he slammed his car door and turned toward the house.

It was him. He was even wearing the tan-colored bomber jacket. And he was stepping up to the front door.

The sound of her own door-chimes was petrifying. She stood with her back against the wall, praying that she was not visible from outside.

He pressed the bell-push a second time. Donna held her breath.

She saw him crouch and peer through the letter-box. Was he going to force the door? She had mentioned only the previous week to Jamie that the catch on the fastening was not very strong. There was no bolt or chain to secure the house against an intruder.

He took a step away, as if he might be about to try using his shoulder, and took a glance around him to see if he was being watched. Donna shivered as those piercing eyes turned in her direction, peering through the window, apparently staring straight at her. Then, thank God, he turned and walked back to the car, opened the door, sat in the driver's seat, and took out a cigarette.

There was no question now of escaping to the hotel for the weekend. She was trapped here. Thanks to the automatic door on the garage, she had driven in unobserved. Now her best chance was to stay out of sight and not use the lights. She felt sick with fear at the prospect of spending the evening in a darkened house, but it had to be so. There was no phone to use because Jamie had refused to have one installed, insisting that for peace of mind in his own home he preferred to be inaccessible.

As dusk deepened into darkness and the car remained in the street, Donna summoned enough courage to lower herself to a crouching position and crawl out of the front room into the hall and out to the kitchen.

By the light of the fridge kept marginally open, she managed to make a sandwich and pour herself some red wine. It warmed her.

She began to make plans. She would spend the night on the sofa in the front room, where she would be instantly alerted if the man broke into the house. She preferred that to lying upstairs in bed, ignorant of what was happening downstairs.

Nine-thirty wasn't too early to make preparations. She improvised a bed with cushions and several coats. Outside, in the lamplight, the Volvo was still there. He was sitting inside, waiting. Donna could see the glowing tip of his cigarette as he inhaled. She had no intention of sleeping, but she stretched out on the sofa in a position from which she could see the window.

The strain of the past few hours must have taken a toll, because as she got warmer under the coats, it was increasingly difficult to keep her eyes open. But she was startled into wakefulness when she heard a sound outside.

She turned her watch toward the lamplight. Four-twenty A.M.! She had slept for hours! Had she really heard a sound, or was it part of her dream?

There was definitely a sound. Footsteps on the gravel outside the window.

She propped herself up sufficiently to see the white, terrifying face of the staring man briefly illuminated by torchlight as he shone it around the window, searching for an opening.

Donna screamed.

She lost all control and dashed from the room and upstairs to the bedroom. She flung herself on the bed and moaned into the pillow for what seemed a long time.

Then a new sound entered her consciousness: footsteps on the stairs, moving upward toward her. Her flesh crawled.

The steps approached along the passage. The handle of the bedroom door made a slight scraping sound as it was turned. The door opened, the light came on, and there, unbelievably, was Jamie.

"Jamie! Oh, Jamie!" Donna sprang up and flung her arms around him.

"Jamie, my darling, how did you know?" She tried to kiss him, but something was preventing her.

It was pressing against her neck, holding her away from him, pressing her down toward the bed.

"Jamie, what is it?"

She lost her balance and fell backward. In that split-second, she saw the ligature stretched between his hands, the piece of white-plastic flex with which he was about to strangle her. She saw the

look of hatred and contempt in his face and she understood that her husband Jamie was a killer, a ruthless murderer.

He said nothing, simply pressed the flex against her throat and began to draw one hand behind her neck to encircle it. She could do nothing to stop him. He was straddling her body with his knees pinning down her arms. She was unable even to scream.

Then abruptly Jamie gave a grunt and the pressure on her neck slackened.

She was overwhelmed by a suffocating darkness, but she was not dead. Jamie had fallen on her. He was smothering her with his body. She struggled to get free, finding the strength to raise her knee and force him to one side. Amazingly, he did not resist. His body had gone limp.

Suddenly his weight was off her chest and she could breathe. She was looking up at a face, but it was not Jamie's. It was the face of the staring man.

Donna whispered, "No!"

"All right. It's all right, my dear," he told her. "I won't hurt you. I'm a private detective. I just knocked your husband on the head. You're safe. He's out cold and handcuffed. He would have killed you like he killed his first wife. It was all set up."

"What do you mean?"

"The trip to Paris. His alibi. He flew over, checked in at the hotel, and went straight out and took a train to Calais.

"He was on the 10:45 night ferry back to England. Seventy-five minutes for the crossing, another train trip, and he was able to get here quite anonymously to carry out the murder. Then he planned to take the same route back and be in Paris again for a business lunch.

"That was the method. The family of his first victim felt sure he was guilty, but they couldn't work out how he had done it. They hired me to investigate him. I had my doubts about his alibi, but I couldn't prove anything. So I had to be patient. The family backed me, paid my expenses, and I followed him, waiting for him to give something away. I was in Vienna, watching you."

"I know."

"It was only a theory, so I couldn't warn you until he actually showed signs of repeating the murder. I tried to speak to you earlier this evening, but you weren't answering the door. I simply had to sit out there and wait. I chose a window to force an entry, so when he turned up I was right behind him."

"You knew he planned to strangle me?"

"It was a carbon copy of the first killing. Why not? That appeared to succeed. I presume he fixed a joint account to grab your money. You're rich like the first one, I take it?"

Donna looked up at the detective and thought about what she would answer. Really, when he wasn't staring he was quite attractive.

"Quite rich," she said with a beguiling smile. "Yes, I suppose I have more money than sense."



DETECTIVERSE

CARPE DIEM

by PHYLLIS WHITE

Latin lover Nick enjoyed a trendy

Modus vivendi.

With wealthy women he employed a dandy

Modus operandi.

He was to any ex-inamorata

Persona non grata;

For all her jewels had been nicked, too—

Horribile dictu.

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THE JURY BOX

by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Booklength mystery fiction and booklength commentaries about the field have been captured in comprehensive bibliographies. But what of the abundant critical material in periodicals and other out-of-the-way places? Is it doomed to be lost and forgotten? Not at all, thanks to the dedication and energy of Walter Albert.

For some years, Dr. Albert, who when not criminally engaged is Professor of French at the University of Pittsburgh, has issued an annual accounting of mystery-fiction commentary in secondary sources. Now, with the help of 21 other specialists in our genre, he offers a magnificent tour de force: *Detective and Mystery Fiction: An International Bibliography of Secondary Sources* (Brownstone Books, 1711 Clifty Drive, Madison, IN 57250; \$60.00). This 779-page treasure embraces writings on crime, detective, mystery, suspense, and espionage fiction, identifying material in many languages around the world. Section I is devoted to bibliographies, dictionaries, and checklists; Section II to critical and historical essays, articles, and books; Section III to entries on the dime novel, juvenile mystery series, and the pulps; and Section IV, the largest (432 pages), identifies material on individual authors. The work ends with a comprehensive index. Albert's compilation, a model of profession-

alism in content, organization, and expression, is guaranteed a place on every shortlist of indispensable reference works.

Not many are still writing the romantic suspense that dominated the 1960s, but one of its leading practitioners, Phyllis A. Whitney, still flourishes. Her latest is *Dream of Orchids* (Doubleday, \$15.95). Here Laurel York is not much interested in seeing her father again, decades after he deserted her mother for another woman. But she's lured to Key West, to her father's household, where her half sisters do not welcome her, where undercurrents of intrigue and treasure-hunting prove perilous, where, despite her instincts, she stays to fight for truth and love. This is Whitney's 29th novel, and she does this sort of thing with a polished hand.

Heads You Lose (Dodd Mead, \$14.95), the second novel about retired businessman Ralph Simmons by Robert B. Gillespie, is top-drawer crime fiction, witty and compellingly readable, much stronger than the first in the series. Simmons' neighbor David Black, a law professor, is a dominating personality, viewed with affection by all. Well, nearly all. Someone *does* cut off his head—while Ralph is unable to account for his actions and thus is prime suspect material—and someone *does* deposit said head for maximum dramatic effect. If Ralph

didn't do it, then maybe one of his other neighbors (who include a certified gangster) or one of Black's colorful household menagerie did this dastardly deed—not to mention those that follow.

Dorothy Salisbury Davis shows in *Tales for a Stormy Night* (Foul Play Press, \$13.95) that the best of her short stories are equal to the best of her novels—which is very good indeed. The 15 stories, all but one from this magazine, vary nicely in theme and setting, and are cast with power and confidence, leaving images that linger in the mind. Highlights include "Spring Fever," in which innocence leads to murder, "Lost Generation," a fearsome story, and two accounts of the curious and deadly McCracken sisters.

The newest about Sir John Appleby, late of the Yard, is *Carson's Conspiracy* (Dodd Mead, \$13.95) by Michael Innes. Here the pleasures lie in language fresh and fancy, not in action or menace. A minor tycoon domiciled near Appleby conceives the notion of staging the kidnaping of his son as an excuse to liquefy his assets, preparatory to relocating outside the reach of extradition. A modest complication: said son is only the figment of his dotty wife's imagination. Not to worry, thinks the tycoon; just put a bit of flesh on the son's bones and the police will be forever baffled. Entertaining, and with a nice surprise twist at the end.

Ralph McInerny, Professor of Medieval Studies at Notre Dame and author of nine Father Dowling mysteries, offers non-series sus-

pense in *The Noonday Devil* (Atheneum, \$15.95). We begin with the assassination of six persons in Rome, among them the archbishop of New York, a loud conservative voice in the Church and convinced that Moscow has a highly placed mole somewhere in the ecclesiastical machinery. The surviving American bishops are political creatures with minor spiritual interests, it would seem, and their two camps begin to maneuver their preferred candidates into the New York territory, a post worth killing for. McInerny's narrative hums along nicely; suspend a bit of disbelief and this will make an excellent diversion.

Britain's David Gethin, who produced a pair of worthy novels about a resourceful chap named Wyatt, now turns to Halloran, veteran of fifteen years of cloaking and daggering. In *Point of Honor* (Scribners, \$12.95), he's on the point of retiring when asked by the Home Office to look into the dicey matter in Wales that killed his colleague, Jack Lane. It's a bloody trail he follows, littered with his kill, as he tries to figure out whose puppet he is. 'Tis a pity Halloran is rendered witless at the scent of a beddable wench—apparently an occupational hazard of spies and private eyes. Otherwise this is good suspense, expressively told.

Paperback reprinters have been gratifyingly active. Recommendations include the following. Collier continues to issue John Dickson Carr: *The Case of the Constant Suicides* and *Poison in Jest* (\$3.50 each). Holt Rinehart Winston pro-

vides two of Joseph Hansen's novels about Dave Brandstetter: *Gravedigger* and *Night Work* (\$3.95 each).

Scribners continues with Arthur W. Upfield and Inspector Napoleon Bonaparte: *The Mystery of Swordfish Reef* and *The Widows of Broome* (\$3.95 each). From Dell comes Martha Grimes (*The Dirty Duck*, \$3.50) and Robert Barnard (*Death of a Perfect Mother* and *Death of a Mystery Writer*, \$2.95 each).

Academy Chicago provides H. R. F. Keating: *Inspector Ghote Draws a Line* and *Filmi, Filmi, Inspector Ghote* (\$4.95 each). Walker has a pair of Gwendoline Butler tales about Inspector John Coffin: *Coffin in Malta* and *Nameless Coffin* (\$2.95 each). Avon is reissuing Donald E. Westlake's novels originally published as by Richard Stark and comprising some of the best fiction about professional criminals to be found: *The Jugger*, *The Seventh*, *The Green Eagle Score*, *The Black Ice Score* (\$2.75 each), and *The Sour Lemon Score* and *Deadly Edge*

as a double volume (\$2.95).

Finally, the recent outpourings from that most active republisher, Harper Perennial Library, include these: a duet in international suspense by Desmond Bagley: *Bahama Crisis* and *Windfall*; a Henry Wade in first U.S. appearance: *Mist on the Saltings*; Michael Z. Lewin telling about crime in Indianapolis: *The Enemies Within*, *Night Cover*, and *Hard Line*; more by Douglas Clark about Masters and Green of the Yard: *The Monday Theory* and *Dead Letter*; a pair by Simon Nash: *Killed by Scandal* and *Death over Deep Water*; a quartet of John Ball's Virgil Tibbs novels: *In the Heat of the Night*, *The Cool Cottontail*, *Five Pieces of Jade*, and *The Eyes of Buddha* (each \$3.50). Perennial also blesses us with early Ross Thomas: *The Backup Men*, *The Seersucker Whipsaw*, and *The Porkchoppers*; and with the suspense adventures of Hamilton Innes: *The Survivors*, *The Blue Ice*, and *Fire in the Snow* (each \$2.95).

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a **NEW Scheherazadian tale** by

JAMES POWELL

"How do you come to be in a cage?" the alchemist asked.

"I am the Thief of Bagdad."

The old man's eyes narrowed. But the sight of what was graven on the steel bars reassured him. "Ah, yes, I recall you were caught in the amber merchant's strongroom with the pride of his jewel casket in your hand."

"A pearl," the thief told him, "as black as a moonless night sky reflected in a summer pool. Its beauty stopped my ears to the watchman's step . . ."

THE HICCUP FLASK

by **JAMES POWELL**

Know, my masters, that there once lived in Bagdad a Caliph named Amalik the Proper. His grandfather, a famous wage of wars, had filled the country's cemeteries to bursting and then left a son behind him who emptied the treasury to support the extravagances of his court. When at last the key of the Great Door of Bagdad passed to Amalik, a ruined and exhausted land was his inheritance.

Now though the new Caliph was a shy, unexceptional man with a stiff carriage and a cool manner, he loved his people well. And in his heart he believed destiny had chosen him as the proper one to lead the Caliphate away from war's crimson trumpets and the spendthrift lutes of pleasure back to the humbler songs of plow forge, and marketplace.

According to custom, the Caliph discoursed publicly on the sacred writings in the palace courtyard at sunset on the last Friday of every

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month. Though no scholar, Amalik discharged this obligation faithfully, speaking from a canopied dais while beneath him the worthies of Bagdad nodded and blinked away the tears of suppressed yawns. Halfway through one of these addresses it happened that the Caliph was seized by an attack of hiccups so violent he was obliged to rush back into the palace, red-faced with embarrassment.

The Caliph's doctors hurried to attend him. But though they worked long into the night, their master's hiccups grew until each rang like a hammer on an anvil, rattling his bones from toes to teeth. Finally, Amalik dismissed them and ordered drummers to be sent throughout the city offering a reward of a thousand gold dinars to whomever cured him of his affliction. Then, exhausted from his ordeal and ashamed to appear in his condition among his wives, the Caliph had a bed made up deep in the cellars of the palace, where he spent a dreadful night with the stone walls echoing each hiccup and (or so it seemed to him) broadcasting it across the Bagdad rooftops.

Early the next morning, a crowd gathered outside the palace, each man eager to share some ancient hiccup nostrum. Over the next several days Amalik submitted to wearing dried toads around his neck, being tickled with peacock feathers, and having his ears and nostrils closed up with wool and beeswax. In addition, he consumed every vile concoction and vaunted tisane presented to him, sat for hours in the smoke of burning rhinoceros horn, and recited a thousand incantations, standing first on one leg, then on the other. Finally, he allowed himself to be ambushed by the three Abdullah brothers wearing garish masks and armed with bells and gongs.

When his heart had returned to his body, the haggard-eyed, hiccuping Caliph sent the drummers out into the streets again, ordering them to announce the reward had been raised to two thousand dinars—with the warning that whoever tried and failed to rid the Caliph of his affliction would receive two hundred lashes from the public executioner. Abruptly, the cures stopped coming.

For the next several days, Amalik, made snappish and short-tempered by his misfortune, paced the palace gardens. Now the servants jumped when he spoke and the vizier advised without condescension and even the Caliph's youngest ceased to pull his beard when they sat in his lap. Amalik resolved that even when he was cured he would maintain this stern manner and use it to drive his city along the road to prosperity. Perhaps one day the historians of his reign would speak of "the hiccups that saved the Caliphate."

And if he was never cured? Then by my beard, thought Amalik, I will ride forth at the head of my Army hiccuping like thunder, and, hearing my approach, my enemies shall flee before me! So swore the Caliph to himself. But in the next moment he had fallen to his knees, touched his forehead to the path, and prayed that his affliction be taken from him.

That very day, the public executioner ushered an old man dressed in mantle and turban of the deepest blue-blackness into the throne room. This gaunt-faced newcomer's deepset eyes burned with a wild fire. He bowed before the Caliph.

Amalik hiccuped and fixed him with as stern a gaze as the situation would allow. "Can you rid me of this?" he demanded.

"I have had some success in such things, Your Honor," said the old man with a thin-lipped smile. "A hiccup, Lord, is a sigh which has been turned malignant by some passing Jinn of the Evil tribe. It breaks forth on the outward breath and returns on the inward, bent on destroying whomever it afflicts as slowly and surely as a water drop will eventually split the purest adamant."

Here the Caliph hiccuped mightily. The old man's flashing fingers seemed to pluck something out of the air under Amalik's nose. From inside his mantle, he pulled a flask of green glass with a band of silver beneath the lip and made motions as if pushing something into the bottle with his fingertips. With his palm over the mouth, he rummaged in a pocket until he found the stopper. When the flask was sealed, the old man held it up to the light for the Caliph to see.

Amalik looked and saw nothing. He cocked an unhappy eyebrow. He had listened to the man's story of wicked Jinns and watched his pitiful dumb show. Now he was tired and wanted to be left alone. He was about to give the signal to have the old man taken out and flogged when he realized his hiccups had left him. He lay his hand on his breast, which was still at last. When he looked at the flask again it now seemed to him that something fluttered there. The joyful Caliph embraced the old man gratefully and pressed the purse of gold dinars on him. Then he swept from the room to inform his wives of the miraculous cure.

The old man slipped the flask inside his garment and the purse after it. Pausing only to blink with wonder at the splendor of the throne room, he followed the public executioner out of the palace.

Amalik spent the next month like one resurrected from the dead.

Every day was a bright gift and each small pleasure came clad in fresh garments. So when he rose again to address Bagdad on the sacred writings he spoke with an enthusiasm his listeners had not come to expect.

But midway into his exhortation, the Caliph suddenly observed the old man in the mantle of deepest blue-blackness listening on the edge of the crowd. Seeing he had the Caliph's eye, the curer of hiccups raised the flask of green glass and smiled. Amalik understood. He knew that if the old man removed the stopper, his affliction would bring its way back to him like a dove to its cote. Pretending to refresh his throat with a sip of fruit juice, Amalik whispered an urgent command to his vizier. Then he returned to his speech and soon had the satisfaction of seeing guards seize the flask from the old man and lead him off.

His discourse behind him, Amalik hurried to the throne room where the guards and their prisoner waited.

"So," declared the Caliph, "you dared to come here to extort money from me. But you see how things stand now. I have the flask and have you."

"My Lord baffles me," insisted the old man. "I came only to be edified by Your Honor's words. That empty flask was in case the evil Jinn passed by again as you spoke."

And indeed the flask the Caliph held had no stopper. Ashamed at having so misjudged the man, Amalik began to pull a massive ring from his finger as recompense. But then the old man said, "And yet I am happy to have this word with Your Honor. With the hiccups of ordinary men, I merely buried them deep and had done with it. But in your case I have felt obliged to guard the flask in my humble residence to keep it safe from breakage, brigands, and pretenders. O Your Honor's station who might use it against you. The burden of this responsibility has distracted me from profitable studies."

"Then return the flask," said the Caliph in a smooth voice. "I will place it in my treasure house for safekeeping."

The old man bowed low. "Sire, I am not able to obey your command. For curiosity bedevils caliphs as much as lesser men. One day it would force you to unstop the flask to see if your affliction really wells within. And, alas, incompetent fool that I am, I am seldom successful in recapturing a hiccup grown wary by imprisonment."

The Caliph's brow grew dark. "What is it you wish?"

"A hundred gold dinars for my trouble," said the old man. "Call for a monthly rental on the flask."

Amalik was quick to realize that for the moment at least he had no choice but to pay the few gold pieces demanded. As they waited for the money to be brought, the old man wet his lips and with a canny look said, "A while back, Sire, I thought Your Honor was about to make me a gift. Indeed it is a mighty ring." Without a word, the Caliph slipped the ring off his finger and handed it over.

But he had the old man followed when he left the palace.

The extortionist rode his donkey to a wine house near the alchemists' bazaar. There he joined a table of shabby old men of the learned sort. The table talked long and heatedly on subtle subjects and drank wine, napkins in fists like gentlemen. A waiter informed the Caliph's man that the one he followed was an alchemist who searched for the Philosopher's Stone which could transmute base metals into gold, another at the table sought the Elixir of Life, a third pursued the system of Perpetual Motion, and a fourth contemplated the Universal Dissolvent.

When at last the old man took his leave, he rode for two hours and reached the ragged foothills of the ancient mountains where a high tower stood atop a crag. The alchemist knocked thrice and loudly at the base of the tower. When a servant opened the stout broad door, he rode inside. A few minutes later, a light appeared in the single window high in the tower. When the light blinked out again, the Caliph's man returned to his master.

Amalik did not like what he learned. It would be impossible to take the old man and his servant by surprise. And any thought of moving against the tower by force brought visions of the flask being thrown from the high window to the rocks below. So for the next few months he continued to pay the alchemist's modest extortions and resigned himself to the gifts which the old man invariably extracted at each visit—this month a silver cup, the next a valuable prayer rug, and so on.

Then one last Friday of the month while the old man stood in the throne room examining a vase of rare cobalt-blue glaze with that appreciative eye the Caliph had come to dread, Amalik's favorite daughter, a smiling girl of a marriageable sixteen summers, rushed in to present her doting father with the first apricot from the tree in the family garden. She came and went like a breeze from the incense forests of Hadramaut. But the Caliph's smile died when he saw the look in the old man's eyes as he watched her go. A chill

found Amalik's marrow, for then and there he knew what the impudent old man would demand on his next visit.

The moment the alchemist left the palace with the cobalt-blue vase under his arm, the Caliph hurried across the courtyard to the royal prison. He mounted to the roof where a soldier stood guard over a man-sized steel cage hanging from a tripod. Each bar of the cage was graven with verses from the sacred writings so powerful that none would dare cut them. Inside, his legs dangling through the bottom bars, sat the famous Thief of Bagdad, a weathered, quick-eyed man with the look of a desert bird of prey.

"Hail, Thief," said the Caliph.

"Hail, Caliph," answered the Thief. "What would you have me steal?"

"May the Most High give you patience, Thief," prayed the Caliph, making a sign for coffee to be brought. For a good part of an hour they drank from wafer-thin porcelain and watched the sun set behind the city walls. Then the Caliph dismissed the sentry and as the darkness took on weight he explained his dilemma in the fullest detail.

"If I am to steal this flask, then first you must give me my freedom," said the Thief at last.

Amalik looked sad as caliphs always do when they are helpless. "No power on earth can release you from the cage where my father placed you."

"Oh, I know this cage is my fate," said the Thief quickly. "Still you could let me return to the bosom of my family, cage and all. My eldest boy has been apprenticed to a burglar. I would like to take his education in hand myself and direct it along a loftier road."

The Caliph pulled his lower lip thoughtfully. Another Thief of Bagdad? Well, he seemed to have no choice. "Let it be so," he declared.

In the next morning's dim, a boy led a camel out through the Great Gate of Bagdad, a litter covered with a purple cloth bobbing like a cork on the sea-swell of the animal's back. Boy and camel did not stop until they reached the mountain foothills not far from where the alchemist's tower stood. Here the camel knelt and, throwing back the purple cloth, the son helped his caged father clamber to the ground. Then the Thief gathered up the cage in either hand as a man might carry two satchels and walked along inside it until the road passed an olive grove whose shade made an attractive head-

quarters. Ordering his son to reconnoiter the tower on foot, the Thief tethered the camel and settled down to wait. Then, as the sun dropped behind the line of mountains, he hitched up the cage again and waddled about, starting a fire and getting dinner ready.

The lad returned, and as they ate he told his father what he'd learned. It was their misfortune that the skill of the masons had left no toeholds between the building stones of the tower's exterior face. But while the lad was hanging about, the alchemist's servant, a simple country soul, had come out to put the donkey to pasture and gather firewood in a stand of trees off from the tower. The Thief's son had offered to help him collect faggots. Later they'd sat on a hillock together and shared some sweetmeats the lad had brought with him in a kerchief. ("I told him I was a sweetmeat peddler's son," said the boy, displaying a knife with a curiously wrought brass handle and giving his father a sly wink. "In return for his knife I promised to come back with a supply to satisfy any sweet tooth. And he believed me.") "My son," said the father sternly, "you are a thief, not a swindler.")

The lad then reported that the alchemist went into town each Friday to shop and socialize with his learned friends. The servant had strict orders to unlock the doors to no one during his absence. This injunction the servant obeyed most scrupulously. The poor soul believed the alchemist had stolen his wits one day, luring them out of his head with a saucer of milk and then snatching them up and imprisoning them in a small ebony box inlaid with ivory which he kept in his pocket. By obeying the alchemist in all things, the poor soul hoped one day to earn them back.

"Taking your servant's wits is like pulling your watchdog's teeth," observed the Thief. Then he fell into a deep reverie. Finally he said, "When next the alchemist goes to the city, the sweetmeat peddler's son will visit the tower."

When Friday arrived, the Thief moved his headquarters deeper into the olive grove and watched the alchemist ride out of sight on his donkey. Then he and his son approached the tower. A knock brought the servant's inquiring voice. The lad identified himself and said he'd brought the promised sweetmeats. The servant could be heard smacking his lips through the oak door. "But I can't let you in, you know," said the poor soul in a fearful voice. "I dursn't open the door the smallest crack. I'd lose my wits forever if I durst."

"Then lower a rope from the window and I'll send up your sweet-

meats in a kerchief," urged the boy. "But hurry! My father saw me at his saddlebag. He follows short behind me with his stick: Ah, I see him coming now. Quick, I must hide! Tie the tope to the bar in the window—I'll attach the kerchief when the coast is clear. Hurry!"

They could hear the servant's quick step on the stairs inside. A minute later the Thief's son peered around the tower and announced that the rope was hanging within reach. Then the Thief struck the door three times, as was the alchemist's custom. Down from the top of the tower came the sound of alarmed footsteps, followed by a tumbling crash as though the hurrying servant had tripped over his own feet and arrived at the bottom of the flight of stairs headfirst. "Is that you, master?" he asked in a voice wracked with pain. "I'd never, never open the door if it wasn't."

"I am known as Mansur the Delectable," announced the Thief, "purveyor of gustatory sweetnesss and delights to the Caliph himself."

"Your son isn't here! Oh, no, indeed!" blurted the servant. "I've never, never set eyes on him! Oh, I shall lose my wits for good for sure!"

When father and son met again in the olive grove the Thief asked, "And can you get past the window bar, my eldest?"

The lad nodded. "Where the shoulders can go, the rest of the body may surely follow." Then he added in a puzzled voice, "But, Father, there are flasks of green glass everywhere in the room at the top of the tower. On the floor, on the books, on the workbench, and on shelves along one wall."

The thief brightened. "Things might be worse."

"But, Father," added the lad slyly, "I know the stall in the bazaar where such flasks can be had two for a penny."

"What are you saying, my son?"

"Father, we could buy a flask. 'Here, Caliph, is your affliction,' we could say. 'Guard it well.'"

"My son, that would be dishonest. In our business above all others, we must give full measure. Besides, what you suggest would be futile as I will explain. Nevertheless, these flasks do answer one important question. The alchemist is no fraud. He does really believe he can capture hiccups. Were it otherwise, we would be helpless. For even if we were able to steal the flask, he would appear with another and claim it was the one he used. And I don't doubt whom the Caliph would believe. Yes, for a fraud any flask would do. But our alchemist

has chosen to hide one flask among many others. Therefore, it alone is important to him."

As they spoke, they saw the alchemist return on his donkey in the moonlight, cursing and muttering to himself, for wine does not make all people sing. The name of a man called Abul-Abbas sat bitter on his lips.

The lad showed the brass-handled knife. "Father, I could strike him down here and now. And who would come before the Caliph to discredit whichever flask we brought him?"

"My son," said the Thief in a tone of self-reproach, "you have been out of my care too long. Understand that we do not murder. We steal."

"How can we steal when we cannot tell the right flask among so many?"

"He will have to show us," said the Thief.

Now when the Thief's son had scampered up the tower on the servant's rope to peer in the window, he had trailed a clew of silk thread after him, which he passed behind the bar and let drop to the ground. This thread enabled him to pull a stout cord up and around behind the bar and back down to him whenever he wished. In this way he could climb up and observe the alchemist tinkering amid his alembics and aludels, or writing in his great clasp-bound book, or poring through his ancient library, or muttering at his cat—one of Prince Attab's breed, who watched from workbench, hearth, or lap.

The lad also observed that some flasks were stacked so that a careless touch might send them crashing down. (These, his father later informed him, and those on the floor as well, were clearly noisy obstacles for intruders. Somewhere among the others must be the one they sought.) And some nights—always, it seemed, when the moon was dimmest and the shadows thickest beyond the fireplace glow—the old man would step into the darkness and reemerge with a flask in hand. And he would sit for the longest time holding the glass up to the firelight, staring inside, and chuckling with black satisfaction.

And so the weeks became a month. At last it was Friday eve. As the Thief's son watched, the alchemist unlocked a humpbacked chest in a corner and drew out a scarlet vest worked with gold and matching turban cloth and slippers. Then he took out another outfit of horizon-blue. He pursed his lips and compared both suits of clothes

thoughtfully by candlelight. He scratched at a gravy stain on the scarlet vest with his fingernail for a minute and then chose the horizon-blue.

When the lad had returned to the campfire and told the Thief what he had seen, he added sharply, "The old man has chosen his betrothal outfit, Father. But we still don't know which flask is which."

"Tomorrow before the sun has risen, you will go into the city and return with a fleet horse," said the Thief. "Leave the rest to me."

The Thief's son had gone and returned long before the alchemist appeared on his donkey bound for Bagdad, the very picture of a man on his way to present himself to the father of his beloved. To the horizon-blue vest and turban had been added a snow-white tunic and a mantle which he gathered up under one arm to show off his slippers. But when the old man came upon the Thief sitting cross-legged in his cage by the side of the road, he reined in the donkey and looked him over. The alchemist's curiosity quickly got the better of him. "Peace, stranger," he said. "Who brought you to this sorry state?"

"My son, who has been hired as a shepherd in the vicinity," said the Thief.

"I meant how do you come to be in a cage," said the alchemist briskly, for he did not tolerate fools well.

"I am the Thief of Bagdad."

The old man's eyes narrowed. But the sight of what was graven on the steel reassured him. He threw a leg over the donkey and dismounted. "Ah, yes, I recall you were caught in the amber merchant's strongroom with the pride of his jewel casket in your hand."

"A pearl as black as a moonless night sky reflected in a summer pool. Its beauty stopped my ears to the watchman's step."

"And our fool, the Caliph, set you free on some amnesty or other, no doubt. If you can be called free." The alchemist swaggered back and forth in front of the cage, displaying at once his freedom and his finery. "And how does it feel, you who were master of the night, to be caged like a parrot? Speak."

"At least it's silenced the constant slandering of my good name," said the Thief. "Time was when the disappearance of every third-rate diamond or flawed ruby was laid at my door. Actually, I never took anything."

"At last I've found an honest man—and he's in a cage," laughed the alchemist sarcastically.

"The most I ever did was share things that weren't mine," said the Thief. The alchemist's incredulous snort prompted him to continue. "When I was old enough, my father taught me our family's secret art: the power to send one's spirit out of one's body and across great distances in a twinkling. Like him and his father before him, I can be in two places at once. That is why this cage is no prison for me. Whenever I wish, my spirit can leave this cage like the smoke from a wood fire. Each noon I pray in Mecca. If I wish, I can travel back to Bagdad in the instant and enter into any lattice window or under any strongroom door and there become as solid again as the wood from which the smoke sprang. This power makes every man's house, harem, garden, larder, and wine cellar mine. And his black pearls as well. Of course, I can carry nothing away when I go. But why should I? Why steal what is there for me to admire whenever I wish? Certainly not for money. I sleep sounder in another man's bed than he does when business and ambition let him sleep at home. This art my father taught me I am now teaching my son. Unfortunately, we must always interrupt his education for him to earn his livelihood."

The alchemist was smiling into the distance and stroking his beard. "What a power that would be," he mused aloud. "No secret could be hidden from you." The old man thought for a moment. Then in a confidential tone he said, "There is one named Abul-Abbas whom I fear. We both seek the method of turning base metals into noble, I by the powder of projection, he by philosophical elixirs." The alchemist belittled these obscure liquids with a contemptuous fluttering of his fingers. "Had you the power you claim, you could visit his workroom this very afternoon while he and I drink with others in a wine house. A great book sits on his workbench. Its last two pages committed to memory would be worth a hundred gold dinars to me."

"I told you I have no need of money."

"Yet your son must spend his days watching over other men's sheep to earn his bread when he could be sitting at your feet learning this great art which would make him happy for the rest of his life."

"True," admitted the Thief. "For his sake, I might perhaps take on your commission. But the money would have to be paid in advance."

The alchemist gave a tired laugh. "How the Famous Thief of

Bagdad, Though Confined to a Cage, Swindled a Fool of His Gold?" No, I don't wish to go down to posterity that way. After all, what proof have I you possess this power you claim?"

"Put me to the test, then," said the Thief. "Send me somewhere and have me describe it."

The alchemist had never traveled far and knew few places in Bagdad that the ubiquitous Thief might not know as well. But all of a sudden, the old man caught sight of the tower standing on the crag. Laughing, he bent over the cage. "See that window high in that tower? Go in there and describe the room to me."

"I hear and obey," said the Thief, grabbing his elbows in his palms, jutting his jaw, and squinting shut his eyes. In the next instant he announced, "I have arrived. I am standing beside a table cluttered with scientific paraphernalia."

"Of course you would describe an alchemist's room. But tell me what you see against the north wall."

Without moving a muscle, the Thief said, "A fireplace, a bellows, a small crucible for heating metals. And the remains of a bowl of gruel on the hob."

This staggered the alchemist. "And in the corner?"

"A small humpbacked trunk."

"Unlock it," said the old man.

"There are flasks in the way," said the Thief.

"They are nothing but my collection of gases," said the alchemist.

"Tell me what's inside the trunk."

"Let's see, now," said the Thief. "One scarlet vest sewn with gold, one turban cloth ditto, and one, two scarlet slippers. A gravy stain on the vest."

The alchemist's jaw went slack. "Even my servant didn't know that," he acknowledged. "The last time I wore that I was a young man searching for the elusive polypharmack, the cure for all diseases. But my betrothed died before I could find it." He averted his eyes. "All right, close up the trunk and return here."

"Son of a donkey!" exclaimed the Thief. "Son of two donkeys!"

"What is it?" demanded the alchemist.

"Surely you heard the racket? I closed the blasted trunk on the tabby cat's tail. It leaped to the topmost shelf of flasks. The shelf collapsed onto the shelf below, sending flasks crashing to the floor."

"Were any on the third shelf broken?" demanded the alarmed alchemist.

"Startled, I stepped backward, lost my balance on an overturned flask, and reached out for that very shelf to steady myself."

"The second bottle from the wall!" screamed the old man. "The one with the bubble in the glass just below the silver band! Tell me, did that break?"

"Let me take a look," said the Thief. In a moment he reported, "No, it is safe and sound."

"The Most High be praised," said the alchemist, adding, "That of all my gases was rare. Come back, then. Come back at once."

"I hear and obey," said the Thief. He relaxed and turned toward the old man.

"You've proven your powers well, if clumsily," said the alchemist. "When I return, I will pay you the gold and direct you to where this Abul-Abbas lives."

And so the old man set off for the city, confident that by nightfall he would possess both the hand of the Caliph's daughter and his rival's secrets. He did not concern himself with the fast horse which overtook and passed him before he was halfway to Bagdad or what the young rider carried in his saddlebag. When he swaggered into Amalik's presence, he was astonished to find his precious flask in the Caliph's hand.

Before delivering over the alchemist to his dungeon master, the Caliph fulfilled the Thief of Bagdad's request that a certain black box inlaid with ivory in the man's possession be opened. Some say at that very same moment it occurred to the alchemist's servant to better himself by leaving a cruel and niggardly master for more congenial service. And so he left the tower, never to return.

For his part, the Caliph had the mouth of the flask dipped in molten lead and impressed with the ancient signet of Solomon the Great to ward off tamperers. Then he entrusted it to the best horseman in the Caliphate. Nor did he feel safe from a growing curiosity until the rider had vanished over the horizon. The man rode and rode until he came to the blue ocean sea. There, as the Caliph had commanded, he cast the flask from a high promontory into the waves.

Here, my masters, I should recommend my bowl to those of you who prefer endings to be happy and bid you good day until you honor me with your ears again. But for the rest of you who enjoy the fruit when it is sour as well as sweet I will add that Amalik spent many a sleepless night over the matter of the Thief of Bagdad's pardon.

or he knew that weak rulers serve a people ill. And subjects always see an act of mercy as one of weakness. So for the general good, the Caliph broke faith with the Thief. He pardoned him but ordered him banished from the city.

Things did not go well for the Thief in exile. Damascus, where he finally settled, was uncongenial. And it is hard to discipline a headstrong son from a cage. The Thief of Bagdad lived to see that son in a low band of robbers and die by the knife in a dispute over the division of paltry spoils. And he lived to see his grandson apprenticed to a common cutpurse. The Thief died of a broken heart and was buried, cage and all, in the very same month when the Caliph malik was fatally injured by a falling roof tile. The Caliph's death as lingering, and in his final delirium he spoke the Thief of Bagdad's name, for it came to him that the tile would have done him no harm had he, too, been wearing a steel cage. At last life fled his body, which was buried in the family's secret mountain tomb.

Years became generations. Then one day the blue ocean cast up a flask of green glass at the feet of a faraway beachcomber. The seal and something aflutter inside made him think he had a Jinn in his grasp, one obliged to grant his liberator three wishes. Hurrying homeward, the beachcomber saw himself husband of his heart's desire, master of a gold palace, beloved ruler of a prosperous people. And he imagined himself and his beautiful wife stepping out onto a balcony to greet the acclaiming population with a loving gesture, arms outspread. Here the flask slipped from his fingers and smashed in the shingle.

At precisely that moment two seas away, the moon was rising over a line of barren mountains. Below the crags, deep in the darkest valley, four men huddled about a meager fire and cursed the moonlight. No ghouls coveted the darkness more than these, the very outcasts of the underworld. The largest of the men squatted a bit apart with his elbows on his knees, face pitted and pocked, hard eyes staring defiantly into the flames. A wolfish skull among the others spat and said hoarsely, "Gold? There's no gold. No jewels." And another face, with a scar where one eye should be, asked, "How long will we let him lead us about by the nose?" The fourth, who was like a camel's, jeered in someone else's high pitched voice, "But his father's father's father was the Thief of Bagdad." Wordlessly, the big brooding man swung a heavy fist and knocked this last speaker over backward into the darkness. "Shut your mouths, too, the rest of you. A man can hardly hear himself think."

In the quick silence, he rose and moved away from the fire. Then he stopped and cocked his head as though he heard a noise in the darkness. He moved deeper into the gully shadows and stopped again. Then he scratched his head in amazement. A spectral sound like echoing hiccups was issuing from a crack in the rock at his feet.

"Here!" he shouted. "Here!" Obediently, the men jumped up from the fire and hurried over with shovel, mattock, and crowbar.

And that, my masters, is how it came to pass that the grave robbers discovered the lost tomb of the Caliph Amalik.



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a **NEW** Griswold story by

ISAAC ASIMOV

"Disguises certainly do work," Griswold said, "but not when they involve beards and rags. What one must do is disguise one's way of life, one's habits, one's personality . . ."

THE TAUNTER

by **ISAAC ASIMOV**

Baranov said, as he stretched and made himself comfortable within the august confines of the Union Club library, "I met an old friend a few days ago—a fellow I haven't seen for a year or more. He'd grown a beard in the interim. A red beard. His hair was brown, but his beard was distinctly red, and it looked very ugly. It was a full beard and hid his face from the cheekbones down, which in its way was a good thing. He could have accomplished it in a less repulsive manner if he'd just worn a mask."

"You're no beauty queen," said Jennings.

"The point I'm trying to make," said Baranov, with what I think was intended to be a look of disdain, "was that I didn't recognize him. He came up and asked me directions, and I was giving them to him when I realized he was suppressing laughter and I looked at him closely and it was old Jim."

"But you *did* recognize him," I said. "That's the trouble with disguises. They don't work, except in fiction. Sherlock Holmes could disguise himself as an old beggar and Watson wouldn't recognize him. In a pig's eye, he wouldn't. In real life, he would say, 'Good heavens, Holmes, what are you doing in those filthy rags?'"

I had one eye on Griswold, who was snoozing peacefully in his high winged armchair. After all this time I know precisely what will make him wake up, and I wasn't wrong. The old fraud opened

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his eyes, fixed them on me with his usual baseless air of superiority, and said, "Disguises certainly *do* work, but not when they involve beards and rags. What one must do is disguise one's way of life, one's habits, one's personality. It's much harder to do that, but when properly done it works."

"You have," I said sardonically, "a case in point that happens to occur to you, I suppose."

You suppose correctly (said Griswold) and congratulations. It is one of the few times one can say that about you.

Every once in a while the Department finds itself trying to track down an enemy agent concerning whom they have almost no information, but who, they suspect, has been funneling information successfully to the other side.

This one, from what they thought they knew, was an East German, but one who spoke idiomatic English and could pass without trouble as an American. There was every chance he had built up a total American identity that could be broken only with the greatest difficulty and that the Department couldn't even begin to break until they had some idea which American he was—and they had no such idea.

About the only clue they had was that the man (or possibly woman) was a "taunter." There are people who are so confident, so secure in their ability to outwit the enemy, that they can't resist sending messages. There are mass-murderers who routinely leave notes with their victims, or even telephone the police to tell them where to find the latest one. Some psychologists say it's the result of a suppressed desire to be caught, but I've always thought it was a perfectly open desire to triumph and to show superiority. Even if they give hints, they seem to be saying, they won't be caught.

In any case, this agent occasionally sent messages, always in the same way. Words from newspaper headlines on cheap paper in a cheap envelope with no writing anywhere, delivered by some drifter, and the message was usually: "You can't catch me." The only fingerprints on it were the grimy ones of the bum who delivered the envelope.

This time, the drifter seemed far less gone on booze or drugs than was usually the case. He held the envelope gingerly by its edges and said confidentially, "In case of fingerprints."

The agent who accepted the letter said, "Why should we care about fingerprints?"

The drifter said, "You're holding it the same way. You're police, ain't you?"

Naturally, there was no answer to that. The agent said, "Just sit down. We'll want to ask you some questions." The drifter sat down.

There were no fingerprints. The message was slightly different. It said, "You still can't catch me." The word "still" was in larger letters than the rest. That didn't put anyone in the Department in a good humor.

They beckoned to the drifter. "Who gave this to you?"

The drifter shrugged. "I don't know. I never saw him before. A guy comes over to me and says, 'Take this into that building there and give it to anybody behind a desk.' He slips me five bucks, so I do it."

"Describe him. How tall? What color hair and eyes? Moustache? Beard? Scars? Fat?"

The drifter shrugged. "Who notices those things? Besides, I don't have to. I have his name and address."

"What!"

"Sure. He had a letter sticking out of his jacket pocket, so I just slid it out and kept it."

"Is that your profession? Pickpocket?"

The drifter said, with a certain insolence, "What kind of a question is that to ask of someone who's doing you a favor?"

"Why are you doing us a favor?"

"I thought you might pay me for it. I can use ten bucks, or anything more you want to give me."

"You give us the letter."

He did, holding it by the edges and saying again, "In case of fingerprints."

The letter was studied. It was addressed to Reuben Dorsey and came from Frank Lavelle. The stamp was cancelled, so the letter had been delivered and the man who had sent the messenger was using the name of Reuben Dorsey, assuming the letter was his.

The agent who had come to see me on the matter—whose name, of course, I won't mention—said to me, "The bum was holding his hand out, so I gave him a ten-dollar bill out of my own pocket. The Department wouldn't pay it."

"Come, come," I said, "don't tell me you didn't find a way of laying it off on petty cash."

He reddened and dropped the subject. He said, "We began our investigation. That evening we went to the address on the envelope

and Dorsey was home. We identified ourselves and asked if the letter belonged to him. 'Yes,' he said, with surprise, and went to the closet to investigate his jacket. He came back and said, 'It must have fallen out. I didn't notice. But how did you two get it?'

"It was dropped outside one of our places."

"But is there something wrong with dropping a letter? Are you investigating me because of that?"

"No, no," I said, "not at all. The person we happen to be investigating is Mr. Frank Lavelle. Amazing coincidence our finding it. He sent you a letter, so we thought you could tell us about him."

"You mean there's something wrong with Frank? That's impossible. He's a hundred percent."

"That's very possibly so, Mr. Dorsey. We have to investigate many people for many reasons, and ninety-nine out of a hundred of them turn out to be absolutely clean. We have no desire to do any harm to any decent American citizen. All we want to do is make sure he is a decent American citizen, and you can help us there."

I interrupted. "What was in this Lavelle's letter, by the way?"

"Well, nothing, actually. Thanked him for a pleasant lunch and hoped they could get together soon. A quick scrawl. It was postmarked the day before, so in all likelihood Dorsey picked it up on his way out, when he passed his letter box. He opened it, glanced over the contents, shoved it in his jacket pocket, and went on his way. That's what he said and there was no reason to doubt it. But let me go on—

"We proceeded to ask every question we could think of about Lavelle—and you can be sure we managed to slip in many questions about Dorsey as well. Through all that, Dorsey behaved himself perfectly. If he'd staunchly defended Lavelle with great loyalty and indignation, that would have seemed phony. If he'd suddenly begun to remember that Lavelle had acted 'funny' on this or that occasion and began to try to distance himself from the man, that would have seemed even more phony. Instead, he acted confused. He would insist shakily that Lavelle was perfectly all right, but we could see he was wondering if there might be something wrong there. He couldn't think of anything wrong—at least he didn't come up with anything—but he seemed uncertain. That was exactly the right reaction, exactly what a skilled agent pretending he was innocent would do."

"Or," I put in, "exactly what an innocent man who had to make no pretense would do."

"Possibly, but we don't think so," said my friend. "We're convinced Dorsey is our man, but that conviction rests on no evidence at all."

"I presume you investigated his background."

"Thoroughly. We spent a week doing that. We went through all the documentation, checked on his job and talked to his neighbors as unobtrusively as possible, visited the town where he was born, and so on. There's no question there is a real Reuben Dorsey, or was. Presumably, the agent we're after needed a look-alike, found him in Dorsey, and took his place. We can only presume that the real Dorsey was somehow smuggled out of the country and either imprisoned or killed, probably the latter. We can't prove it, however. We can't even keep a watch on this Dorsey for very long—and in the present climate of opinion it would be dangerous for the Department to look as though it were persecuting an innocent man."

To explain that remark, I might mention that these events took place before Reagan became President.

I nodded. "I can see where you'd feel very frustrated. But what is it you want me to do?"

"You know how it is, Griswold," said my friend. "You've got this peculiar mind which can sometimes see something the rest of us don't." (I could think of more gracious ways of putting it, but I made allowance for his misery.)

"So?" I said.

"So, I have here all the reports of the investigation—every word. What I would like you to do is to go over them very carefully and tell us where we missed something. We must have. No cover is perfect. Somewhere there's a hole, even if only a small one. Maybe we're too close, and if you bring a fresh mind to it you might see it. But, please, this must be kept strictly confidential. You mustn't ever let on you helped us or saw these papers. And we won't be able to give you any credit if you do help us."

"When have I ever asked for credit?" I said. "But I don't have to look at the reports. What you've told me is quite sufficient. I can give you what you need."

"You can?" he said, dripping with disbelief—though why he should I don't know.

"Of course," I said, and told him. It did him no good, as it happened, but I was right.

With that, Griswold composed himself for sleep again and I automatically prepared my usual response.

Griswold said, "If you kick my shin, you get this Scotch and soda in your face, which would be an unconscionable waste of good liquor."

I said, "Then tell us what you said, if you can think of anything."

"It was very simple. I said, 'Have you considered the drifter?'"

"What!" we all said.

"Yes, that's what my friend said, too. I said, 'When did you ever have a drifter who considerately brought you a letter that would set you off on a wild-goose chase? When did you ever have a drifter who handled two envelopes by the edges only?'"

"To avoid smudging fingerprints," said my friend stupidly.

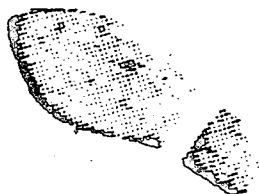
"Or to avoid leaving his own," I said. "He gave you something that occupied you thoroughly and you told him to wait. Did you keep an eye on him or did you just leave him in the office unsupervised?"

"Of course I knew the answer to that, and my friend just sat there looking at me with his mouth open.

"I said, 'Is there anything missing in the office? Some piece of paper that's been missing for quite some time?'"

"Of course there was, and a reasonably important piece of paper, too. They never located it, and they never located the drifter, who had given them a name and address under pressure which proved to be totally false. And they still haven't located the agent to this day, though it may be he's no longer in the United States.

"However, the Republic still stands. One mistake, even a stupid one, isn't likely to shatter us, especially since the other side usually matches us, mistake for mistake."



a **NEW Boley-McKee** story by

JOHN F. SUTER

Neither Boley nor McKee noticed the front door open. It wasn't until the big young deputy spoke from behind McKee that they were aware of him.

"Sheriff. Sheriff McKee."

McKee and Boley looked around. "Hello, Evans," the sheriff said.

"We got us a problem over at the jail, Sheriff," Evans said . . .

FOR THAT SWEETHEART OF MINE

by **JOHN F. SUTER**

Arlan Boley was halfway through his cup of coffee when the sheriff came into the lunchroom.

"McKee!" Boley called. "Come and sit!"

The sheriff, a spare man, nodded. "Don't mind if I do." He removed his hat, revealing a lighter shade of skin above his deep tan. While he brushed at his light-brown hair, he put the hat on the shelf of the rack at the end of the counter. "Saw your flatbed outside with the bulldozer on it," he said, taking the swivel seat next to Boley. "You goin' or comin'?"

Boley sat up straight, a move that emphasized his wide shoulders. "At this time of day? Goin' home. What else?" He stared pointedly at the sheriff. "How come you're not on the job, instead of hecklin' honest workin' folks?"

The sheriff spoke briefly to the counter girl. "Coffee, black. If you really want to know, Boley," he resumed, "there's plenty of 'em mindin' the store right now. Besides, we only got one tenant, any-

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way." He turned his glance toward the large front window. The courthouse was visible a block away.

Boley was about to speak when McKee added a footnote. "But that one's enough."

Boley's eyebrows lifted toward his crinkly blond hair. "Oh? Maybe jail won't hold him? That type?"

McKee shook his head. "No. It's the kind of case it is. Young fella name of Noel Douglas—"

"I know him," Boley interrupted. "He helped me one summer, three years back. Good boy with a tractor."

"That was three years back. He's not been so good the last year or two." McKee's coffee arrived and he took a sip. "Him and that Wallace girl he's been livin' with have been doin' dope. She just had his kid a little over a month ago. That's the worst part. Little boy, it was, and he'd been showin' withdrawal symptoms."

Boley had picked up his cup, but he set it down sharply.

The sheriff looked out of the window again. "Yeah. They've had him over at the county hospital, tryin' to get him to be somethin' like normal."

Boley pounded his fist softly on the edge of the counter. "In a West Virginia county like this one—more trees and rocks and animals than people. Why, Warren, neither you nor me has any use for a drunk, but we can understand most drunks."

McKee nodded. "I know."

"What do you have Noel locked up for?"

"Suspicion of murder."

"Murder? Whose?"

"The baby."

Boley stared.

The sheriff swallowed some coffee. "It's not a hundred percent, but it's probable. Young Douglas kept showin' up at the hospital every day, wantin' to see his kid, askin' about him, and so on. Always carried one of those little duffel things. Nurses kinda got used to him. Then today somebody got careless and wasn't lookin'. Early part of the afternoon, the baby turned up missin'. He'd been snatched."

"Noel was there today?"

"Yeah, he'd been seen."

"Then what?"

"The hospital called us and we started to look. No luck, until Clarence Martin thought he saw a groundhog go under his woodshed.

He took a look. No groundhog, but there was something wrapped in a little blue blanket shoved under there. It was the baby, wrapped from head to foot. Asphyxiated."

Boley shook his head in disbelief. "Murder? It doesn't seem possible. He might have carried it off—after all, it was his own kid—but—"

The sheriff stared into the mirror behind the counter. "We picked Douglas up not long after that, and it wasn't easy. Jack Morris said he'd rather hogtie a black bear. The boy kept sayin' that there was one Douglas that'd never give anybody any trouble."

"What about the mother?" Boley asked.

"She's been back home with her folks for some days, I hear."

Neither of them noticed the front door open. It wasn't until the big young deputy spoke from behind McKee that they were aware of him.

"Sheriff. Sheriff McKee."

McKee and Boley looked around.

"Hello, Evans," the sheriff said.

"We got us a problem over at the jail, Sheriff," Evans said.

McKee shifted in his seat. "Tell me about it."

The big man flushed with embarrassment. He suddenly looked younger than his twenty-six years. "We none of us had any idea—"

The sheriff stopped him. "Who's *us*? When I left, there was you and Jack Morris and that state cop, Harman, who was waitin' to go campin' over at the lake with you."

The deputy agreed. "Still the same, mostly. The thing is, that Wallace girl of Douglas' came in."

"Wanted to cry over him, I guess. Did Jack let her see him?"

Evans looked at the floor. "She's in the cell with him."

McKee stood up. "In the cell? What's goin' on, Evans? What the hell is goin' on?"

Evans looked up. His face was anguished. "That's just it, sir. She was carryin' a suitcase—"

"Sure of herself, wasn't she? Must have known she could twist any of you around her little finger!"

"—and a shotgun."

The sheriff was about to open his mouth. He shut it.

"And when Jack told her she couldn't go to that cell, she set the suitcase down and opened it."

He had their attention.

"Sheriff, in that bag there was I don't know how many sticks of dynamite. And detonators."

McKee sucked in his breath. Boley stared.

"Then she aimed the shotgun at that stuff and said, as quiet as you please, that she wanted to see Noel. In his cell."

The sheriff seemed hypnotized. "I'd have let her in, myself."

"What do we do now, Sheriff?" the deputy asked.

"We play it by ear," McKee replied. "First thing, I'd better get myself over there."

Boley was looking at the courthouse, although there was nothing to see but the big old stone building. He couldn't see the small jail, which was an annex in the rear. He was seeing the Wallace girl in his mind's eye. Something stirred in his reasoning. "McKee, no. You'd better just stay here until this thing can be worked out."

"Stay here?" the sheriff snapped. "Are you out of your mind?"

Boley slid off his seat. He was aware that several groups of diners were staring at them.

"Evans," he said, "did Jack send you for the sheriff?"

The big deputy was uneasy. "Well, no, he just said to get over here and tell him."

"You said that the three of you were there *mostly*. What does that mean?"

"Jack asked Harman to make some calls on any phone outside."

Boley addressed McKee. "I think he was gettin' both of the men out of there." He turned back to Evans. "What calls was Harman to make?"

"One to the hospital, to alert them we might need an ambulance. Another to the chopper service in case something happens that the hospital can't handle."

The sheriff's breath whistled through his teeth. "Really layin' himself on the line. The only lawman left over there. I'd—"

"You'd better not, I tell you, McKee," said Boley, reaching for his arm. "You've got to realize—"

There was a rumble and a concussion that later proved to have been heard eleven miles away. The floor beneath their feet shook. With a loud snap, the plate-glass window in front of them cracked in one long fracture, from top right to bottom left, but it held.

The counter girl screamed and the diners started to their feet.

The sheriff turned and shouted at the staff and the customers: "You folks ain't hurt! Try to stay cool, and don't go out until this thing's all over! You're safest where you are." He beckoned to Boley

and the deputy. "Now I'm *sure* I'm goin' over there. So are you two. Come on!"

As the three raced toward the courthouse, they could see the effects of the blast increasing in devastation. Not far past the lunchroom, no window remained intact. Heaps of pulverized glass were everywhere, inside and out. Overhead hanging signs were suspended at precarious angles, many of them nearly wrenched from the bolts holding them to the buildings.

Boley marveled that no building was demolished or seemed to have suffered major wreckage. The shopfronts around the square had lost all their glass and merchandise was shattered and strewn about. No fires were apparent and there was no sign of human injury. Most people were probably inside, he thought. Somewhere a siren was screaming, and the eccentric whoop of an ambulance was beginning.

"Boley," the sheriff panted. "Gonna need me at least one more deputy. Want you."

"Swear me in."

"Hell. Can't—remember—words. Consider—it—done."

"All right," Boley gasped back.

The courthouse was a massive three-story building constructed of large stone blocks. The jail, once a part of the basement, had been made a one-story rear annex more than fifty years ago. It, too, was made of stone, to match the main building. The east end housed the sheriff's office, a deputies' room, and an area for a secretary and communications equipment. Going west, on either side of the main corridor, were four cells for women. Past these, an umbilical corridor went left to the main building, then ten cells for men flanked the main hall. A women's room was near the sheriff's section and a men's room at the far end of the hall. Both detention sections could be locked off from any hall by barred doors.

When they had almost reached the jail, McKee waved them to stop.

"Evans," he said when he could speak, "if there's any janitors left in the main buildin', get 'em to shut off all the utilities where they are and over here. If nobody's there or they're too scared, *you* get around and shut things off." He lifted a hand to stop protest. "Don't tell me you don't know where to look. Think. Find out, and do it. Start in the basement. And get the main gas valve first thing."

As the deputy left, Boley said, "Maybe you'd have better sent me."

"It's a toss-up," the sheriff answered. "He knows the people and a lot of the layout. Come on, let's look at 'er from the outside before we try to go in."

Boley's impressions were revised as they came closer. The shops damaged most were on the jail side or at either end—those in front suffered only the loss of glass. Four cars and a half-ton pickup were overturned and blown back against the fronts of buildings. A mild but detectable odor of natural gas was in the air.

McKee cursed under his breath. "Why in hell couldn't it be summer instead of fall? Boley, if you see any moving vehicles before I do, warn them there's the makin's of more trouble in the air."

Boley looked at the scene with awe. Some of the heavy stones at the end of the jail had been moved outward in an irregular fashion, some of them displaced by as much as six inches.

Then he saw the body on the grass, not far from the east door of the jail. He started to run toward it, his mind registering the fact that the whoop of the ambulance had stopped.

It was a man, lying on his back, his legs covered by the metal east door. Jay Harman, the State Police corporal, not in uniform. Boley grasped the top of the door and managed to lift it free of Harman, then he knelt and touched his fingers to the man's carotid artery. He was relieved to find a faint pulse.

Footsteps crunched in glass on the walk behind him. "Here's your first one, boys," he heard McKee say. Then, in the same breath, the sheriff exclaimed, "By God, it's Harman! Is he alive, Boley?"

"Seems to be," Boley answered. "He might be busted up some. That door was across most of his legs." He looked at the two paramedics. "Has anybody put out a warning about the gas?"

"They know about it. Not an engine's running within a block in any direction."

"They have to start up again."

One of the paramedics spoke up. "We coasted in here and we're headed downhill. We can coast out. Let's get this man out of here and see if there's any more to go along."

McKee was heading into the wrecked building. As Boley went to follow him, Evans returned from the courthouse at a run. "The gas is off," he panted. "So's the—electric—and water."

"How're things over there?"

"Not as bad as over here. Lot of stuff knocked around. Nothin' that can't be fixed. Might take some time."

"How about where the hall from the jail comes in over there?" Boley asked.

"It went through that hall like a dose of salts. All the doors went with it, even the one from the main building to the street."

"Excuse us," voices interrupted. Boley and Evans stood aside hastily as the two paramedics raced to the hole where the door had been. They vanished into the tangle of rubble, twisted pipes, and loose wire.

Boley saw a flashlight moving about inside.

"Sheriff," one of the paramedics called. "Any idea how many were in here?"

McKee answered from a distance. "Three!"

"Where we are a wall's down, and a foot's stickin' out!"

"That's probably Jack Morris." The sheriff's voice changed. "Somebody should be around there to help you get him out."

"That'll take time," one of the paramedics called. "We oughta get that other guy outside to the hospital. Is there any sign of the other two?"

The question received no answer.

"Sheriff?"

McKee's voice finally sounded, very choked and fumbling. "Plenty of sign. More 'n you ever want to see of these two. *Boley!*" he cried. "You here yet?"

Boley stepped into the wreckage. "Right here, McKee. Evans is back, too."

From somewhere out of sight, the sheriff continued to yell. "Good! Well, you two goldbricks get over to that tore-down wall and try to get Jack Morris out of there. That'll let those guys rush Harman to the hospital!"

A voice called through the wrecked outside doorway. "McKee—you in there? Fire Department! We can smell a trace of gas, so we reckon there's no fire!"

A crunch of broken glass and rubble sounded, and the sheriff appeared, holding his flashlight. His face was powdered with white dust with streaks in it. Boley wondered if they had been made by sweat or tears.

"False alarm up on High Birch had us fouled up," a range fireman in complete gear said from the doorway. "You look like you need help."

"All right," McKee agreed. "It looks like Jack Morris is under that wall. I'm afraid he's dead, but I hope not."

"Right away," the fireman said. "What happened here, anyway? Gas explosion?"

The sheriff's face took on a set expression. "Suitcase full of dynamite." He gave a synopsis of the situation. When he finished, he held out his left hand. "Anybody want a souvenir?"

Boley reached for the object. It was a suitcase handle, but not the original. Someone had apparently whittled a wooden substitute after the first handle had worn out. He looked at it with some interest. It was serviceable, but it wasn't expertly done. There were ridges in the wood that would have been a discomfort to the carrier of the case.

Boley was bitter with himself. He felt he was letting McKee down. Four weeks earlier, in an encounter he and McKee had had with some timber thieves, an old ballad had lodged itself in his mind: "They Cut Down the Old Pine Tree." To his disgust, it was back.

"For a coffin of pine

For that sweetheart of mine—"

Then he remembered what he had tried to tell the sheriff just before the blast went off.

"McKee," he said.

The sheriff looked around. "Yeah, Boley?"

"Let's you and me step outside. I got somethin' to say."

"Won't it keep?"

"Hardly."

The sheriff nodded, and they went outside. By now a crowd had gathered, but nobody was attempting to come close.

"Look, McKee," Boley said, "how about arrestin' whoever did this?"

The sheriff took a deep breath. "Are you out of your mind? We *know* who did it. In there—"

"No," said Boley firmly. "Start thinkin', Warren. If it'd been the Douglas boy that did it, I wouldn't pay it any mind. The shotgun is even understandable. But where would a girl get a suitcase full of dynamite and detonators?"

"Well, the suitcase—" McKee began, then stopped.

Boley let him think it over. "Who hates you, McKee? Any Douglasses or Wallaces?"

McKee considered this. "The boy's older brother Rob hasn't much use for me. The Wallaces I mostly get along with. Hey, no—the girl's uncle, Alan!"

"You're sure? It could be that Jack or Evans was the target."

"No, I'm not sure. Why'd you stir this up in the first place?"

Boley laid it out reasonably. "Ever since Thelma died and left you alone, you've practically been makin' that office your second home. Anybody who wanted to square things with you'd know where to look."

McKee sighed. "I guess we'd better check it out." He looked around. "And maybe we won't. Neither of those two county cars is goin' anywhere for a while."

"We can take my flatbed," Boley said. "And nobody but the two of us and Evans knows I'm a deputy."

"All right," said McKee. "I'll see if I can get things partly battened down. You go get your truck and pull over here. I'll be with you as soon as I can."

Fifteen minutes later, McKee emerged from the wrecked jail and climbed into the passenger side of Boley's truck. He was carrying a five-cell flashlight and a shotgun. As he got in, he slipped the shotgun behind the seat.

"You got a gun, Boley?" he asked.

"No. There's a short piece of two-by-four I'll be carryin'. No gun."

McKee reached into his shirt pocket and took out a badge. He handed it to Boley.

"It was Jack Morris's. He won't be needin' it. You mind?"

"Not me."

Boley slipped the badge into his right hip pocket and started the motor. "Guess you can tell the fumes are gone." He glanced at the sheriff. "Your problems all taken care of?"

McKee looked out of the window. "They're on hold."

Boley steered a way through the littered street. "What do Rob Douglas and Alan Wallace have against you? I've heard a little, but there has to be more."

The sheriff looked at him. "I'll tell you, Boley, but I have a question for you. Even if either one of 'em hates the very ground I walk on, why would he throw away two kids and God knows how many other people?"

"Too mean to care."

"Yeah, there are some like that, but I still find it hard to buy." He looked out the window again. "But you do have a point about that dynamite. Both of them are miners, and some miners have a way of gettin' dynamite."

"Okay. Rob Douglas. Greedy and arrogant from the word go. Years

back his old man sold off some nice pasture land to his neighbor, Rheuel Morgan. When Rob came of age, he and his old man had a lot of bad words about it, but nothin' got changed. Then old Douglas died and Rob started movin' his fences onto Morgan's land. Morgan's none too young or he'd have given Rob what for. He could have gone to court, but he came to me with the maps and deeds. It wasn't hard to see he was right, so I came down on Rob. He tried to dig in his heels, but I didn't let him. He's hated me ever since."

They were at the edge of town now. Boley switched on his high beams. "Yeah, he's like that, Warren. If it's him, maybe he's had it in for his kid brother and the girl, and he thought takin' you out, too, would make it a grand slam."

"There's still Alan Wallace."

"Alan. The rest of the family's not like that. The girl's father, Bill, and her mother, Flora—"

"No. Never even a traffic ticket. But Alan—I've had him in that jail I don't know how many times. Drunk, destruction of property, public nuisance. What got him down on me, Charlie Amick posted his land against huntin' and Alan came in on him lookin' for deer. Didn't see sign of one, so he shot up one of Charlie's cows. I was goin' by when he did it. I shoulda let it go to the game warden or Charlie's lawyer, but I got a thing about stuff like that. I stopped, went up to Wallace, smashed his rifle on a rock and bent the barrel, then threw him in jail. Jail he could take, he was used to it, but the ruination of the rifle got to him. I'd better never turn my back on him."

They were on a two-lane blacktop road with narrow shoulders. "If we take anybody in," Boley said looking ruefully at his friend, "where will you put him?"

"Not my problem," McKee said dryly. "Dynamite was involved. That makes it Federal. I'll let them worry about it."

Boley wanted to keep McKee thinking, making them a team, so he asked a question he could already answer. "Douglas and Wallace both live on this road. Which comes first?"

"Douglas. Around the second curve on your right."

"The both of us face him down? Or do you want me to be givin' him the bad news about Noel while you hang out of sight and cover me?"

The sheriff considered.

"Let's try the second idea. He might not be so cagey with you.

"Don't show him the badge unless you have to. Slow down and let me out just before you go around that last curve."

Rob Douglas's place was a mobile home with three steps to the front door. A green fiberglass cover protected the steps from rain.

Boley drove into the pull-in space and cut his motor. A dog began to bark inside the house. Boley reached under the seat and got the two-by-four piece of scrap lumber he had mentioned to McKee earlier. He slid from the cab and walked to the house.

When he knocked on the aluminum storm door, an outside light came on. A man's voice challenged: "Who's there?"

"Arlan Boley. That you, Rob?"

"Yeah. Okay." The inside door swung inward, showing a dark-haired man with a turn-down moustache. He gave an impression of fatness, but Boley wasn't deceived. Douglas made no move to open the aluminum door. He confronted Arlan through the top glass.

"What's on your mind, Boley?" He glanced at the piece of wood in Boley's right fist.

"Not what you'd think. Warren McKee asked me to stop by and give you some news about Noel."

The look of suspicion left Douglas's face. "Thank you, Boley. We got a call a little bit ago. I reckon it's true, then. Not a hope that he made it?"

Boley shook his head. "No. McKee can't even talk about it yet."

"Looks like that sneakin' tax collector's got some decency in him after all. They said the girl and somebody else is gone, too. That right?"

"Jack Morris, we think. That state cop, Harman, might be hurt bad, too."

Douglas looked past him at nothing in particular. "A bad ol' day I got nobody now, except for Rachel and the kids." He looked again at the wood in Boley's hand. "Whatcha carryin' that for?"

"Hopin' to borrow your pocketknife a minute. I'm headin' for Joe McDougal's to leave off my bulldozer. I might need this if that mean German shepherd of his isn't tied up. I need a knife to cut me a handle for it. Mislaidd mine."

Douglas nodded, reached into a back pocket, opened the outer door, and handed Boley his knife. Boley looked at each of the three blades, then chose the largest. While he whittled, he made talk.

"Rob, where'd that girl get that dynamite?"

The big man shook his head. "I don't figure she did."

"Somebody gave it to her, you mean?"

"No. I suspect he had it."

"Noel?"

"Yeah. I'd guess he gathered all that stuff together and figured that if either of 'em ever got pulled in, the other one would do just what she did."

Boley stopped cutting, looked at what he had done, and shut the knife. As he returned it, he said, "Where would he get the dynamite?"

Douglas shrugged. "That crowd he run with. Don't ask me."

Boley was unconvinced, but he said nothing. He turned away, then stopped. "Well, Rob," he said, "I'm sorry for your trouble. I know McKee is, too."

The lines in the big man's face were starting to change. He swallowed visibly. "Thank you, Boley. Thank you kindly." He closed both doors quietly.

McKee was waiting inside the truck.

Boley started the engine. "What do you think?"

"Not him."

"My feeling. Well—six more miles to Wallace's place. Give us time to sort things out a little."

McKee rubbed a knee with the flashlight. "I wonder how many Wallaces we'll run into. Alan doesn't have a phone. Maybe the rest'll run over to tell him." He looked down. "You know, a man might get the idea you were comin' at him, you carryin' that piece of scrap. You finish cuttin' your grip?"

"Not all the way."

McKee rummaged in a pocket, then threw a knife on the dashboard. "You're welcome to use that."

Boley smiled. "Thanks. You keep it."

McKee persisted. "You might as well. It's an extra I picked up."

Boley made no comment. The pasture land had blended into woods, with varying thin areas and dense areas. Here and there, small houses stood in cleared land. In some spots, potatoes were grown for sale, in others blueberries, in still others tobacco.

"Boley," McKee said suddenly, "Wallace and Douglas aren't a bit alike. You'd better know that."

"I've run into him a little. I have some idea."

"You should talk to his neighbors. One year Paul Williams had him a nice barnful of hay to sell. Wallace had about half, two-thirds as much, shot full of weeds. One day when Paul and his family were

away his barn caught fire and burned. Nobody knew how come, but Wallace sold all of his hay. Paul had nothin' but sweat for his effort. Another time George Kirk had a pig get loose and it strayed over on Wallace. Except for the leavin's, which got dumped on a far corner of George's land, that pig wasn't seen again. There's more, but I'll shut up."

"I'll be careful," Boley said.

Wallace lived in a dip between two hills. As they neared the crest of the first one, McKee eased the shotgun out from behind the seat as he had when they had approached Rob Douglas's place. "You shift down," he said to Boley. "That'll cover when I slip out."

Wallace lived alone in a five-room cottage that was badly in need of paint. It crowded the road, so that Boley had to pull in on a short unpaved drive that went behind the house.

He picked up his wood again, slid from the truck, and climbed back up the drive to the front of the house. The steps up from the yard took him to a sagging front porch. A porch light came on and an eye looked around a tattered blind covering the glass in the door. A key rattled in the lock and a two-inch gap appeared beside the jamb. "Boley," a rasping voice said. "What do you want?"

"Warren McKee sent me. I have some bad news for you and your family."

"They ain't here." Boley was silent. "Is it about what happened to my niece and that Douglas no-good a little while ago?"

Boley wished he could see the man's face. "Yes. Has somebody been by?"

A low chuckle came through the opening. "No. I heard it."

Boley's reflexes froze. "You heard it?"

"Couldn't miss it. Everybody in the county musta heard it."

"And you knew? Could you come out here and tell me about it?"

Something thumped, then the door opened and Wallace came out. He leaned against the frame.

The appearance of Wallace's house and the stories against him were not attractive, but a first impression of the man himself would have been favorable. He was dressed in blue jeans, a white T-shirt, and heavy work shoes, all clean and unstained. His sun-browned skin showed no ground-in coal dirt and his closely cut black hair was brushed smooth. Behind wire-rim glasses, his dark eyes glinted without malice. The wide smile on his lean face showed white teeth. He could have been anyone's uncle.

Like Rob Douglas, he looked at Boley's scrap of wood. "Were you figurin' to beat the door down to get my attention?"

Boley told him the same story he had given Douglas. "I know McDougal's dog," Wallace laughed, handing over his knife.

As he began to pare the wood, Boley said, "You ever think your niece'd do what she did?"

Wallace lifted his shoulders. "I never could tell about that girl. Not like the rest of the family." He let it trail, then added, "I ain't even sure she *was* a part of the family. Not altogether."

Boley's whittling didn't miss a beat. "Oh?"

Wallace passed a hand over his mouth. "My brother Dick has always been too trustin' to suit me. His wife could tell him it was noon when it was midnight and he'd believe her."

"But what did you think of the girl? Like her?"

"Not much. Funny thing, though—she always liked me. Anything I'd tell her she'd believe me. Anything I told her to do, she'd do it."

"What did you think of the Douglas boy?" Boley asked.

"Started out good. But he didn't end up that way, did he? All on the outside, nothin' on the inside."

"Still," Boley observed, "I hear he planned what they did. It took a lot of guts to do that."

"Maybe," Wallace grunted. "But who knows who pulled the trigger? And how do we know he planned it? Maybe *she* did. Or maybe somebody else laid it all out and she followed the plan."

Boley held the wood up to the porch light and squinted at it. "You know, Wallace, I'll buy that. I think somebody did lay it out for her—even supplied her with what it took to do it. You."

Wallace straightened. "I'd be careful about what I was sayin' if I was you, Arley Boley."

Boley also straightened. He had only a short piece of lumber and a pocketknife, but he was counting on McKee. "Wallace, you said you *heard* what happened. You don't have a phone. You didn't say anybody told you about it. You only heard the blast. Then how do you know what happened?"

Wallace laughed. "Everybody in the family knew that Douglas kid said he'd try this sorta thing if either of 'em got taken in."

Boley took the badge from his pocket and showed it to Wallace. "All the same, I think you'd better come downtown with me and discuss this."

"When I had nothin' to do with it? Not in my lifetime!" Wallace shouted. "Or yours!" He reached inside the door.

"Wallace! Drop that gun!" McKee yelled, vaulting over the side of the porch. He kicked his own shotgun to Boley and turned the light from his flashlight into Wallace's eyes. As Wallace wavered in indecision as to where to aim, McKee's flashlight crashed into his left elbow and he dropped the gun. McKee kicked it out of reach and pulled handcuffs from his belt. "Get him over to the rail," he told Boley.

With Wallace's right arm in a hammerlock behind his back, Boley marched him to the porch rail and McKee handcuffed him to it. "Wallace," he barked, "I'm takin' you in for assault with a deadly weapon."

Boley drove, ignoring the endless cursing coming from behind him. The wind was carrying most of it away.

"Did you hear all of that we said back there?" he asked McKee.

"I did."

"I didn't hear you mention questionin' him about bein' mixed up with these deaths."

"No, you didn't."

Boley looked at McKee sharply.

"But what he said—"

"I heard what he said. Now let me ask you one. What did you find out with your whittlin'?"

"Not a thing."

"Lookin' for a knife with a big nick in the blade, weren't you? Like the one could have carved that suitcase handle. You thought Rob Douglas or Wallace could have given the girl the case."

Boley nodded grudgingly. "That's right."

McKee picked up the knife he had tossed on the dashboard earlier. "Still have your wood? Try that."

Boley pulled to the side of the road and found his piece of scrap. He made several cuts on the edge of the wood with the knife.

"You know," McKee told him, "even if either one of 'em whittled that handle, it still wouldn't be worth a thing. You could only tie somebody to that handle. You couldn't tie him to the dynamite."

"It might give you a place to start."

McKee shook his head. "You know, Boley, you're pretty smart. But even people we don't like can be smart, too."

In the interior light of the cab, Boley studied the cuts he had made in the two-by-four. "It looks like the same knife. The cuts on this

wood and the cuts on that handle look alike. Where'd you get this knife, anyway?"

McKee took a long time to reply. "My foot kicked against it back there in the jail. In what was left of that cell. I don't know why I picked it up. I wish I hadn't." He turned bitter eyes to Boley. "They were the ones who didn't care if they took Jack Morris or anyone else with them."

He sighed.

"I was hopin' your idea was right," he said. "That way somebody might have to pay for what they did."



ANNOUNCING THE EQMM READER AWARD

From its first issue, *Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine* has been dedicated to pleasing readers—to providing the most enjoyable, original mystery and detective fiction available. And it has been suggested to your editors that our regular readers might like to participate in the selection of the best short story published in the magazine each year. We think it's a fine idea, and so in the Mid-December issue there will be a ballot you can tear out and send in (not backing a story), voting for the one story you most enjoyed in EQMM in 1985. The winning story will be announced in the April 1986 issue of EQMM and the author will receive a plaque to honor his or her special contribution to the mystery short story.

a **NEW Jonas Pickett** story by

MICHAEL GILBERT

They arrived at the infernal zoo, where there were animals with electric eyes, gaping jaws, and a background of banshee-howling. The last cavern was, in some ways, the most effective. It was the tomb. In a ghastly green light, to an accompaniment of moaning and sobbing, human heads were displayed projecting through holes in the backcloth—distorted, moronic, and leering. Doctor Abrahams was interested to observe that the screaming of the children in the carriages ahead now had a more genuine ring . . .

THE REIGN OF TERROR

by **MICHAEL GILBERT**

Jonas Pickett was sitting on a bench at the end of the pier watching the seagulls.

He was not, as he was fond of explaining to his friends, a retired solicitor. He was a retreating solicitor. Having made as much money as a bachelor of modest habits was likely to use in the rest of his lifetime, but not wishing to rust in idleness, he had abandoned a successful practice in North London and set up a modest office in Shackleton-on-Sea.

The trouble was that it was becoming too damn successful. He was beginning to turn away new clients. And human nature dictated that the more clients he turned away, the more flocked to consult him.

He had been firm on one point. On a lovely summer's morning he was not going to kick his heels behind his elegant office desk. After some argument, he had compromised with his secretary, Claire, and had agreed to carry with him a horrid little gadget called a radio-pager.

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Claire had devised a code.

One bleep meant come back before lunch, there are papers to sign. Two meant an unexpected client. Three was an emergency.

"And I mean a real emergency," said Jonas. "Like the office burning down. Not that a mouse has appeared in the muniments room or Sam has brained some overpersistent salesman."

The second contingency was the more likely. Sam Conybeare, their office factotum, had once been a strongman and exhibition boxer in a circus. He had a short-fused temper which he vented from time to time on everyone except Jonas, who now abandoned his inspection of the seagulls and examined the pier. It was a palatial structure, a bit out of scale with the rest of the town. All right at Brighton, thought Jonas, but they could have done with something a bit more modest in Shackleton. It had a concert hall for the pierrots who came each summer and an amusement arcade with a miniature roundabout for young children and a ghost train for children of all ages. Also rows of space-age games and a few elderly slot machines which had fascinated Jonas when he discovered them.

Originally they had been operated by the insertion of a penny. Nowadays you had to buy a metal disc which cost you five pence. When this was inserted, exciting things happened. Gravestones rose in churchyards, bats flitted round belfries, and skeletons emerged from the cupboards in a haunted house. One of the most popular was the Reign of Terror. In this a guillotine descended on the neck of an aristocrat and old women waved knitting needles in ecstasy.

Worth all the space-age games put together, thought Jonas.

The amusement arcade was open from two o'clock in the afternoon until nine o'clock in the evening, from May to October—a compromise to suit the permanent inhabitants of Shackleton, many of them elderly, who considered that the pier was a place for walking, fishing, and thinking about life. They pointed out that they had to put up, in August, with Baileys Circus on the Lammas. Four weeks of pandemonium. Enough was enough. Jonas agreed. He disliked disturbances of any sort, human or mechanical.

His radio-pager gave two bleeps.

He said, "Blast," got up, and started back through the crowd, which was beginning to thicken. A squat man with a squint snapped a camera at him and said, "Fifty pence for a lovely picture to put on your mantelpiece."

Jonas said, "Take that damn thing away."

The man grinned. "No offense, granpa. I thought the kids might like a picture of the old man."

Jonas ignored this impertinence and pushed his way out into the street.

At the office he found two men, both of whom he knew. He had helped Farmer Maggs when there was trouble over his bull, Black Bob. With him was Mike Landless, proprietor of the South Wind Restaurant.

"I told Mike you looked after me all right," said Maggs. "So when Mike had this bit of bother I thought I'd bring him along and inter-jooce him."

"No introduction necessary," said Jonas. "I've eaten a lot of good dinners cooked by Mr. Landless."

The South Wind was in the street behind his office.

"Nice of you to say so," said Landless, who was a tubby middle-aged Londoner. "I hope we can keep it up. Perhaps I'd better explain. It's not only me, there's a lot of us in it—almost all the main restaurants and hotels in the town."

Jonas had some idea of what was coming. He had heard the stories that were beginning to circulate.

Landless said, "It's these people from FSP who've been going 'round."

"Food Sales Promotion? Headquarters in Brighton?"

"That's the crowd. Their reps have been calling on us. They know that most of us buy our supplies locally. I get a lot from Mr. Maggs here. New potatoes and mushrooms and asparagus and raspberries and strawberries and such. The idea was, would I switch all my orders to World Wide Suppliers? I told him thank you very much, but I was well suited. That was when he got a bit nasty."

"Nasty?"

"Perhaps that's the wrong word. But implying that I'd better think again. What he actually said was that it might be *safer* to deal with his clients, who were a large outfit, rather than relying on buying here and there from farmers who might let me down. He sort of underlined that word, 'safer.' The way he said it, I thought he was repeating something he'd been taught to say. In fact, I got the impression he wasn't a hundred percent happy about it."

"I suppose you'd heard about what happened in Brighton last summer."

They had both of them heard.

There had been the Fooderie and Hamburger Palace which had turned down the approach of FSP. The Health Authorities had made a lightning raid and discovered a swarm of black beetles in a food-store they swore had been kept as clean as a new pin. There had been Gino Ferrari's Fish Restaurant on the front. Coming down to open up one morning, Gino had found the dining room almost knee deep in offal from the Fish Cleaning Station.

"A few dead rats for good measure," said Landless. "It mightn't have been so bad if they could have cleared it up, but someone seems to have taken a picture and sent it to the papers. I saw it myself. Nasty."

"And what happened?"

"Seeing as how they had no further trouble, I guess they took the hint and decided to buy everything from World Wide. They were fortunate in a way. Their customers were mostly day trippers and such, who wouldn't have heard the stories. They've survived. Same with the Fooderie. The Frenchman wasn't so lucky."

Jonas had heard about Monsieur Laurenceau. He had an up-market French-style bistro and had built up an exclusive and faithful clientele. Then had come that disastrous attack of food-poisoning. Some of the victims had been very ill indeed. One old lady had nearly died.

"He couldn't take it," said Landless. "It was that old girl nearly croaking that finished him. He packed it up altogether."

"So having got Brighton under control last summer, I suppose they're now extending the campaign."

"Here and in Eastbourne."

"Is there anything we can do?" said Maggs. "It's hitting us all."

"Not easy," said Jonas. "What it comes closest to is demanding money with menaces. But they're not asking for money—or not directly. And from what you tell me, the menaces are fairly indirect, too. It seems to me that the real answer is to organize. If all the restaurants and all the hotels combined and said No, you'd hold them off."

Maggs and Landless looked at each other. Maggs said, "Afyf Williams," and sighed.

Landless said, "That's right," but he said it without much enthusiasm.

Jonas knew about Afyf Williams.

He was the proprietor of the Everdene Hotel, one of the largest in Shackleton. He was a Welshman and a reformer. He appeared to

have a good deal of time to spare from running his hotel. He devoted it to crusading.

There had been the no-sport-on-Sundays crusade, which had been unpopular; the clean-up-the-cinemas crusade, which had had some support from the parents of young children; and the keep-the-traffic-away-from-the-High-Street crusade, which had been, as his critics pointed out, not entirely unselfish since the one-way system he had proposed would have favored his own hotel at the expense of his rivals. This had been stamped on by the police and had led to a clean-up-the-police-force crusade.

"He's not the man to take something like this lying down," said Landless.

"Got busy already, has he?"

"We've had circulars from him, farmers and all. I brought one to show you."

It was stirring stuff. Resist blackmail and intimidation. Englishmen won't stand for bullying. Don't listen to them, give them the toe of your boot.

At the foot there was an invitation (more a summons than an invitation, thought Jonas) to turn up for a mass meeting outside the Town Hall. "This Saturday," said Jonas. "I take it you'll be going."

"It should be quite a performance. You've got to hand it to him, he's a rousing speaker."

"All Welshmen have got the gift of the gab," said Maggs.

Jonas thought he might go along himself. Afyn Williams in full spate could be worth listening to. He said, "Okay. You've got your leader. Now all you have to do is stand behind him."

Tea was a sociable gathering, normally held in Jonas's room. Claire poured out. His partner, Sabrina Mountjoy, came in from her room, protesting regularly that she had no time to waste. If there was any excitement in the offing, Sam Conybeare came up from the basement to join in the fun. Jonas passed on to them what Maggs and Landless had told him.

"I've looked at the dates of the three incidents," he said, "and I noticed that the trouble at the French restaurant was a fortnight *before* the others. I don't know a lot about food-poisoning, but it does seem to me that it would have been very difficult to get hold of the bacillus and introduce it into the food Madame Laurenceau was cooking. I wonder whether FSP might have seen that the food-poisoning was a good starting point for a campaign and built on it."

"If that's right," said Sabrina, "isn't it equally possible that the black beetles really were in the Fooderie store. I don't trust these quick-service places."

"The offal didn't arrive of its own accord in that fish restaurant."

"Might have been a crowd of boys who had a grudge against the proprietor."

"No," said Claire. "It's a regular campaign. Those weren't the only three incidents. The others weren't quite so dramatic, that's all. Customers getting up and shouting the odds about dirty plates, people refusing to eat what was put in front of them and throwing it on the floor. It doesn't take much to give a restaurant a bad name."

"It's happening, all right," agreed Sam. "And I know who's doing it. Louie the Nose and his boys. Mostly they work on the race course. Did you hear about that jockey that doubled on them? They broke both his legs and dumped him in the stall with this horse. Then he threw stones at the horse till he got really wild and finished the jockey off. Crafty, you see. When they found the body, they thought he must have gone into the stall and been attacked."

"I don't call it crafty," said Claire. "I call it filthy."

"Well, they're not a nice crowd," agreed Sam mildly.

"What I find it very difficult to believe," said Sabrina, "is that a company like World Wide would employ these sort of tactics. They're a huge international consortium. I believe the ultimate control is either German or American. Surely they're much too big—"

"I thought about that," said Jonas. "They *are* big and efficient. They operate on a regional basis. The lot that sells down here would be the South Eastern Group. Now suppose this group had been doing rather badly in comparison with the other groups in this country. The local regional boss—I've met him and didn't like him much—a man called Claude Schofield—he feels he's for the chop unless he can organize a dramatic turnaround. So he gets hold of the top man at FSP—"

"Carl Fredericks," said Claire.

"A boy friend of yours?" suggested Sabrina.

"Not on your nelly. He's fifty and he's got an expensive stomach and three chins. I think Jonas is right. And I'll tell you why. Claude and Carl are golfing buddies. Suppose one day on the golf course Claude says to Carl, 'Get your FSP reps busy selling my stuff and I'll cut you in for a private commission. Say ten percent on any increase in sales.'"

"You're right about one thing," said Jonas. "World Wide is the

sort of big organization that wouldn't hesitate to sack a regional boss if his figures were bad."

Claire said, "And that would be particularly unfortunate for Claude. I heard—only a rumor, mind—that he's been badly dipped lately at the races. If he couldn't pay the bookies, he might find himself being trampled on by a racehorse."

Jonas finished his tea. He said, "It's an unpleasant business. I'm glad we're not directly involved and I hope we shan't be."

On the following morning, which was a Friday, this hope was dashed with the arrival of Afyn Williams. The first impression was a shock of white hair, bristling white eyebrows, and a pair of light-blue eyes. The next was an ensnaring Welsh tongue, the voice of an orator from the valleys. When Jonas understood what Mr. Williams wanted him to do he said no, and went on saying it until he realized he was making no impression on his visitor.

"It's a simple thing. It just needs a man of your authority, Mr Pickett."

"I don't think—"

"None of the other lawyers in this town are of any use. Not the least use. It requires a man who speaks with authority."

"I'm not sure—"

"All that's necessary is for you to explain the law to Chief Superintendent Whaley."

"Suppose he doesn't believe me?"

"He will believe the law, as expounded by you."

"Just let me get this straight," said Jonas. "The police have forbidden you to hold your meeting tomorrow."

"They have purported so to do."

"And you say they've no right to stop you."

"It's not I who say it. It's the law. I have studied the decided cases. As, no doubt, you also will have done."

"All right, I'll have a word with my partner, who knows a lot more law than I do. If she supports you, I'll speak to Whaley. Not that it'll do a blind bit of good. The police have a lot of latitude in matters like this."

With that, Afyn Williams had to be content. He would have liked to have gone on talking, but Jonas was firm.

Sabrina, when consulted, said, "He's right. In theory, that is. A public meeting can only be stopped by the authorities if they can show that there's a likelihood of disorder resulting. The normal case

is where one lot announce a meeting and their opponents promptly decide to hold a meeting in the next street."

"Fascists and communists."

"That sort of thing. Of course, there's nothing like that here. But the police do have a pretty wide discretion and I can't see the local bench opposing them."

Jonas thought about the local bench and could only agree.

"I suppose I'd better have a word with Whaley. I warned Williams that it would do more harm than good. If I could have fixed it up with his number two, Jack Queen, I might have got somewhere."

Chief Superintendent Whaley was large, courageous, thick-skinned, and obstinate. Like an articulate rhinoceros, said Claire, who had once danced with him at a tennis-club social. His disapproval of Jonas dated back to the early days of Jonas's arrival in Shackleton. He received him now and listened to him with formidable politeness.

He said, "I know Claude Schofield. We get all our Christmas supplies from the World Wide Stores in Brighton. I've often told him he ought to open a branch here."

"I'm surprised he hasn't," agreed Jonas.

"This other man, Fredericks. I've never heard of him. Who is he?"

"Carl Fredericks runs Food Sales Promotion. It's an advertising agency, with a lot of representatives who go 'round finding markets for their clients' goods."

"I see. And your idea is that Fredericks is getting a personal makeoff from Schofield and using some of it to pay for music to back up the salesmen."

"It's not my idea. It's the idea of a number of hotel and restaurant owners who've had visits from these people."

"And you say they've been threatened."

"No," said Jonas unhappily. "That's just what they're careful not to do. They simply drop hints. It's what happened last year in Brighton that's scaring people here."

"Yes. I had a word with Chief Superintendent Maxted about that. There's been some pressure selling there, no doubt. He thinks it may have been exaggerated. In any event, Shackleton isn't Brighton. We haven't had any trouble here yet."

"Not yet," said Jonas. He could see that the rhinoceros was heading down a fixed track to a predetermined end and that no arguments were going to stop him.

"What we don't want to do is to stir up trouble here before we've any cause to do so. That puts *us* in the wrong."

"And you think that a public meeting to discuss the matter is going to cause trouble?"

"In the ordinary way, perhaps not. But we've had some experience of Mr. Williams. You know him, I expect."

"He's elected himself as my client. That's why I'm here."

"I see." Whaley looked at Jonas thoughtfully. "I've told him we can't have the Saturday-afternoon traffic in the High Street disrupted. It's difficult enough to keep the traffic moving as it is. If he insists on holding the meeting in spite of my warning, I shall get my men to disperse it. If Williams resists, they'll have orders to bring him in. I hope they won't have to arrest you, Mr. Pickett."

This was said without a smile.

"I hope so, too," said Jonas. "I'll go along now and tell my client what you've said. If this afternoon's meeting is going to be cancelled, there isn't a lot of time to do it."

Jonas went straight 'round to the Everdene Hotel. As he went, he was cursing Afyn Williams and cursing him wholeheartedly. The last thing he wanted was a feud with the police. It did neither him nor his clients any good. He hoped, without much confidence, that the Welsh crusader would listen to reason.

He found a worried boy in the front desk at the hotel. The boy said,

"Dad's not here. He went out about half an hour ago."

"Have you any idea where he went, or why?"

"He doesn't tell me much. I think it was a telephone call he had. He said it was important."

"Does he know that the police have put a stopper on his meeting?"

"Yes. He knew that. Whaley was onto him earlier this morning. What he said, as he was going out, was that if everything went as he thought it would, there might be no need for a public meeting after all."

Jonas thought about it. It didn't make a great deal of sense. He said, "I'm going back to my office now. When your father turns up ask him to give me a ring."

The boy said, "You're going to advise him to play along with the police—I hope."

Jonas gathered that he didn't approve of his father's crusading. Jonas said, "I most certainly am . . ."

He waited patiently, first in his office and then in his flat, until past two o'clock, but the telephone remained silent. It meant missing his lunch, but this troubled him very little. He often ate nothing between breakfast and dinner.

At half past two he wandered down to the Town Hall. There were quite a few people collected 'round the steps, but Williams wasn't there and no one seemed to know what to do. *Hamlet* without the Prince of Denmark, thought Jonas. Then Whaley appeared, pushing his way through the crowd. He climbed the steps. No need for a loudspeaker. His booming voice carried quite clearly.

"I've told your organizers that if they persist in holding this meeting they will be breaking the law. There's no objection to your meeting later, at a more suitable place, but not here and not now."

Jonas wondered what would have happened if Williams had been there. As it was there was no real resistance. People started to drift away. Whaley came down and climbed back into the police car.

Shortly after two o'clock on that same afternoon, Doctor Abrahams, who was the police doctor, had passed through the pier turnstile accompanied by his sons, Pete and Jim. Pete was dancing with excitement. He said, "Hurry, hurry—we don't want to miss the rain." They dragged their father through the crowd like two small bugs towing a liner.

"Plenty of time," said the doctor. "The amusement arcade's only just opened."

In spite of Pete and Jim's urging, when they arrived at the ghost train there was already a queue. There were two small girls in the charge of an old lady and a teenaged girl who was trying to control three small boys and a large dog. The rest were unaccompanied children.

The doctor and his sons got the last carriage to themselves. There was a toot, the lights went out, and the train plunged into the tunnel.

Doctor Abrahams observed the effects with interest. He thought they had been rather skillfully organized. There were three set pieces, each one accompanied by appropriate noises-off. The first was the graveyard. It was hung with skeletons which jiggled their arms and legs in time with the tolling of a bell. The children in the carriage ahead of them screamed in joyful unison. Pete and Jim were silent, but entranced.

Next they arrived at the infernal zoo, where there were animals with electric eyes, gaping jaws, and a background of banshee howl-

ing. The last cavern was, in some ways, the most effective. It was the tomb. In a ghastly green light, to an accompaniment of moaning and sobbing, human heads were displayed projecting through holes in the backcloth—distorted, moronic, and leering.

Doctor Abrahams was interested to observe that the screaming of the children in the carriages ahead now had a more genuine ring. As their own carriage swung into the third cavern he ceased thinking about this. There was something much more urgent on his mind.

As soon as the train stopped, he took out some loose change, gave it to Pete and Jim, and said, "I've got something to do. Get along to the slot machines. I'll join you there."

His sons looked surprised, but scampered off.

The track of the ghost train was circular and operated in both directions so that departures and arrivals could be handled from the same point. The proprietor was getting ready to let in passengers for the return trip when Doctor Abrahams stopped him.

He showed him his police card and said, "I'm sorry, but you'll have to shut up shop. I'll telephone the police if you insist, but there's no time to waste."

The effect of this pronouncement on Aylett was unexpected. There was none of the bluster and protest that Abrahams had anticipated. Instead, he seemed to shrink. It was as though most of the air had been let out of him. He opened his mouth, but no words came out. "Quick," said Abrahams. "Turn out all the comic effects and switch on some proper lighting. You can do that, can't you?"

Aylett nodded. He pulled out a notice which said *Closed for Temporary Repairs*, led the way inside the turnstile, disregarding the protests of the waiting children, and turned two switches. Then he led the way into the tomb. The glaring overhead light had stripped it of all its mystery. Three of the projecting heads could now be seen as rubber masks. The fourth, though it was painted with the round eyes, white cheeks, and fat red lips of a clown, was human.

Doctor Abrahams ripped down the backcloth. Afyn Williams had been lashed to the framework of metal girders with his head projecting through the screen. Abrahams said, "Knife. Or scissors. Don't waste time."

Aylett scuttled away. The doctor worked on the gag which had been fastened into Williams' mouth and had it out by the time Aylett came back with a knife. The doctor glanced at the knife but made no move to take it. He was looking at the gag, a fat wad of cloth

with strings attached. It had been chewed into rags and was wet with blood and saliva.

Aylett said, "Oughtn't we to get him down?"

"Too late," said Abrahams. "He's dead. Been dead some little time. Telephone the police. I'll wait here."

Chief Superintendent Whaley was not easily moved, but for all its stolidity he was shaken.

He said, "Your idea, Doctor, is that Williams choked himself trying to chew that gag out."

"When a proper autopsy has been made," said Doctor Abrahams cautiously, "I think it will show that the actual cause of death was suffocation. Equally, it might have been shock. He wasn't a young man."

"Painting and powdering his face—I suppose they meant it as a joke."

Doctor Abrahams said, "A bad joke that went wrong." He, too, was upset.

"Do you think Aylett was in it?"

Doctor Abrahams thought about it. As a professional man, he disliked jumping to conclusions. He said, "The way he reacted when spoke to him demonstrated that he knew there was *something* wrong. When he realized that Williams was dead—well, that was quite a different matter. He nearly passed out."

"The ghost train is his outfit. There was a dead man in it. He can't bestep that. We'll pull him in for questioning."

"I wish you could have pulled him in right away to stop him talking. Too late now."

Whaley grunted. Like all policemen, publicity was something he heartily disliked.

"One thing did occur to me," said Abrahams. "You remember that business at the fish restaurant in Brighton. The people who did it took a photograph and sent it to the press. If the object of this operation was to make Williams look a fool, mightn't they have done the same thing here?"

"You think it's the same people?"

"I'd think so, yes."

"I'll have a word with Maxted about it. He told me he thought the muscle behind the Brighton episodes came from the racecourse. Well, he can attend to that. I'm going to shake down Aylett. He's the man in the middle . . ."

Jonas was saying much the same thing to Sabrina. He enjoyed discussing problems with her because she almost always took the opposite view to his and argued it tenaciously. He called her his favorite No-woman.

He said, "Aylett is the key to this."

"I don't follow that," said Sabrina. "Didn't the boy at the hotel tell you someone had telephoned his father to arrange a meeting?"

"Correct."

"The idea being that some sort of compromise could be arranged. They'd lay off Shackleton if Williams abandoned his campaign."

"Right again."

"Well, Aylett couldn't do anything like that. He wasn't in a position to make such an offer."

"I didn't suggest it was Aylett who telephoned. Fredericks must have done that. On the other hand, the last thing *he* was going to do was come anywhere near Shackleton. I've no doubt he spent the morning parading 'round Brighton, establishing a series of beautiful alibis for himself. No, no. He'd simply have warned Aylett that Louie's boys were coming and that he was to hide them in the ghost train."

"How would they get into the arcade? It's locked until two o'clock."

"No problem. There's a back entrance on a lower level of the pier where the public aren't encouraged to go. If they dressed as workmen and kept their eyes open, they'd slip in easily enough."

"And what was Aylett supposed to do when Williams turned up?"

"I imagine he'd be hanging 'round just inside the public entrance to the arcade, out of sight as far as possible. When he saw Williams he'd open it up for him and say, 'Step inside. Mr. Fredericks is waiting for you.'"

"Why should he agree to do anything of the sort?"

"I could think of half a dozen reasons. Maybe he owed money. Or Fredericks had scared him by threatening to put the hard boys onto him. He didn't strike me as a very robust character."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" said Sabrina. "The plan wasn't to kill Williams, just to make him look a fool. As soon as he'd been let out, he'd put a finger on Louie's men and they'd be up for criminal assault at least."

"Not necessarily. Remember they were waiting for him *inside* the ghost train. It's pretty dark and they'd probably have put on some sort of mask. All Williams could have said was that he was grabbed

from behind and tied up. When they'd finished fixing him up, they could slip out the way they'd come in."

"Or easier still," said Sabrina, "wait till the amusement arcade opened and mix with the crowd." She seemed to be thinking it through, testing it for weaknesses. In the end she said, "You may be right. It could have been done that way. If no one saw Aylett letting Williams in and everyone keeps their heads, the police are going to have the devil's own job proving it."

On Monday morning, Landless arrived with copies of the local and national papers. He said, "They're making a meal of it. Lucky they were stopped from publishing the photograph."

"Then there was one?"

"There certainly was. It was sent to the *South Coast News*. A friend on the editorial side showed it to me. Naturally, they made a copy before they handed it back to the police. Just in case they might ever have a chance of using it, though I don't see how they could."

"Unpleasant, was it?"

"Not just unpleasant. It was—oh, comic and gruesome at the same time, and horribly scary."

"Then thank goodness it wasn't published." Jonas had been studying the papers. "The stories are bad enough by themselves."

Landless said, "Someone's got to stop this. What are the police doing?"

"I'm afraid I'm not in their confidence. I imagine they're grilling Aylett."

"That won't get them very far. The people they ought to be grilling are Louie and his boys. Everyone knows it was them who did it."

"Knowing isn't proving."

"Why don't they circulate photographs of these thugs, post them up all over the place, with a notice asking anyone who saw them on or near the pier on Saturday to contact the police?"

"Awkward if it turned out that it wasn't them."

"It's easy to make objections," said Landless, who was getting angry. "But I can tell you one thing. If the people who did this aren't stamped on good and hard, and quickly, World Wide is going to have a lot of new customers in Shackleton."

Jonas's mind sometimes moved in a disorderly and illogical way. It was activated by stray thoughts, coincidences, and impulses: The

mention of photographs had summoned up a mental picture of a squat man with a squint.

When Landless had taken himself off, grumbling, Jonas turned to the classified pages in the local directory under Photography. Some of the entries he was able to dismiss. They were high-class outfits that specialized in studio portraits for weddings and such. He didn't visualize the stout man as belonging to any of them.

In the end, he narrowed down the possibilities to three—Instapics, Happy Snaps, and Souvenir-pics. He thought he would visit them that evening. By nine o'clock the pier would be shutting down and the photographers would have returned to their shops, bringing the fruits of their day's work with them.

Instapics was the nearest. When Jonas went in, he saw he'd made one good guess. The squat man, a Mr. Bugden, was behind the counter.

He said, "Ullo, Mr. Pickett. Don't tell me. The grandchildren have been after you for that picture you wooden let me take."

"Not exactly," said Jonas. "What I want is information. And since I shall be taking up your time, I'm quite prepared to pay you for it."

Mr. Bugden looked at him shrewdly. He said, "Your inquiries wooden relate, by any chance, to the poor old sod they found in the ghost train?"

Jonas nodded.

"Then you can have any information I've got for free and welcome."

"I'm very grateful," said Jonas. "What I was going to ask about was what you might call the tricks of your trade. To start with, I don't suppose you take a photograph every time you click your camera."

"Not always, no. It's a matter of experience. Fr'instance, people are more likely to buy a snap at the end of their holidays than at the start."

"How do you know when it's the end?"

"When the kids have got brown legs and dad's nose is peeling."

Jonas laughed. Mr. Bugden said, "Soften as not a happy family like that will buy the snap. If they don't, all right, usually it's just thrown away. A few we do hang onto, such as if you get a shot of someone who's got some publicity value, like it might be the mayor or the top policeman. If there was some story about them, maybe you could make a sale to the local paper."

"And you keep those ones?"

"If they're good pictures, yes."

"Could you show me last Saturday's lot?"

"Sure." Bugden went to a cupboard, selected an envelope, and spilled the contents onto the counter. There was a group photograph of the pierrots and pierrettes, who were opening that week at the concert hall, one of a smiling man holding a fish with his wife admiring it ("Won the angling competition"), and a solemn one of a clergyman ("Reverend Tobias, from St. Michaels, always threatening to close down the pier").

Jonas saw that they all had the date stamped on the back.

"Tell you something else about them. It's not only the date. The sun being out—I can tell you what time of day they were taken. That sort of detail comes in useful sometimes. See that shadow. That's the top of the concert-hall roof. Just like a sun dial. The pier runs north and south, right? So at one o'clock the shadow's dead central. By four o'clock it's moved off the east side."

"I see what you mean," said Jonas. He examined the snapshots in front of him. "That man with the fish. The shadow hasn't reached the middle point. Say half past eleven, or twelve?"

"Just about. And Tobias was midafternoon I remember. About three o'clock."

"Then the sun was shining all day on Saturday."

"Every blessed moment. Does it help?"

"It shortens the odds, very slightly," said Jonas. "But it's still a long shot. Could you give your opposite numbers in Happy Snaps and Souvenir-pics a ring and tell them to expect me?"

"Will do. Happy Snaps will be Major Piper. And don't forget to call him Major. He likes it. Souvenir-pics is a Mrs. French. They'll both be glad to help when I tell them what you're up to." As Jonas was leaving, he added, "I wooden say old Williams was a popular man, but we don't like characters from Brighton throwing their weight around in Shackleton."

Major Piper already had his Saturday snapshots out when Jonas arrived. He said, "I'm afraid they won't be much help to whatever it is you're after."

There were several more of the pierrots' troupe and one of a pudding-faced boy.

"Fell into the sea and was rescued by one of the fishermen. You'd have thought his parents would have wanted a snap, wouldn't you?"

"If he was my son, Major," said Jonas, "I think I'd keep him away

from the camera for a year or so. Perhaps he'll be easier on the eye when he's a bit older."

He thanked him and made for his last port of call.

The office of Souvenir-pics was at the far end of the Town. His two visits had taken time. It was already dark and a fresh wind was blowing in off the sea. Jonas shivered and turned his collar up. His mind was full of faces. Faces with bloated lips and burst eyes. Faces that worked their jaws and tried to scream but could make no sound.

There was a light in the shop and Mrs. French opened the door to him herself. She said, "Mr. Pickett? I've got something I think you might find interesting." She led him to a photograph. "When our man noticed Williams, he remembered the public meeting and the fuss about it and followed him up to see if he could get a good picture. Which he did."

"It's beautifully clear." Suddenly Jonas found it difficult to speak.

"I thought you might want some copies so I've had six made."

"You're an angel. Let me give you a piece of advice. First thing tomorrow take the original to your bank and ask them to put it in their strongest strongroom."

"You think it's that important?"

"It's not just important," said Jonas softly. "It's dynamite."

When Jonas sat down at his desk on Tuesday morning, he reached out twice for the telephone and twice drew back his hand. He was aware of the views of Chief Superintendent Whaley. In the present case, it was possible that those views were shared by his second-in-command, Superintendent Queen. In the end he said, "Well he can only snub me." He grabbed the instrument. Like the other two telephones in the office, it was on a direct outside line. He dialed the number of Shackleton Police Station. When he heard Queen's voice at the other end, he said, speaking fast, "Look, I wanted to ask you one question. I don't imagine this is a good line to do it on. Could we meet somewhere?"

"A question about what?" Queen's voice was cool.

"About that business on the pier."

The silence that followed was so long that he thought the superintendent might have gone off to have a word with Whaley. Apparently no, he had been thinking. He said, "I've got to be at the Everdene Hotel at twelve o'clock to take a written statement from

young Williams. If you happened to be in the manager's office at the same time—"

"I'll be there at five to twelve," said Jonas. "What I've got to ask won't take more than a few minutes."

When he saw the superintendent, he noted the signs of strain in his face. His superiors and the press between them must have been giving him a hard ride.

Queen said, "All right. Ask your question and I'll see if I'm allowed to answer it."

"Before I do that," said Jonas, "I'd like to make my own position in the matter clear. Williams was my client. I understand from Mrs. Williams that she would like me to go on acting for her and the estate."

Queen had no comment to make. Jonas went on. "It so happens that I've got hold of something. Whether it's going to help or not, whether it's important or unimportant, turns on a single point. You've been questioning Aylett. Can you tell me, broadly and without going into any detail, what his story is?"

Queen chewed over this in silence. Then he said, "If I answer your question, do you undertake that this something you've discovered comes straight to us? No fooling 'round, no trying to be clever."

"Just as soon as the information is hard, you shall have it."

"Very well. You said to tell you Aylett's story without details or trimmings. That's easy. There aren't any. It's a flat denial of seeing anyone or doing anything. He thinks two of Louie's men must have got into the arcade by the lower entrance. They must have met Williams and induced him to go in with them. He swears that the first moment he knew anything was wrong was when Doctor Abrahams showed him the body. The doctor says that's a lie, it's clear he *did* know something was up. But we can't shake him. He's obstinate and he's frightened. And when you're dealing with a man who's obstinate and frightened, you might as well talk to a deaf monkey." Jonas could hear the ragged edge of strain in his voice.

He said, "If I wanted to telephone you this evening, where would I find you?"

"I've spent the last two nights on a camp bed in my office. I expect I shall be there tonight as well."

When he got back, Jonas sent for Sam and said to him, "I want you to get hold of Aylett. I believe you said you knew him."

"I wouldn't say we was buddies. I met him a few years ago at Portsmouth Fair, running a coconut shy. The sort where the coconuts are nailed on. What do I say to him?"

"Ask him if he'll come along and have a word with me."

"I'm told he's pretty busy. That ghost train was popular before—now the queue's a hundred yards long. All the kids in town want to get on it. Gruesome little buggers."

"Do your best," said Jonas. "If he can't come till the arcade shuts, that's all right with me. I don't mind how late he is. I'll wait up for him."

Claire said, "I thought your idea was to steer clear of this thing. Now you seem to be getting mixed up in it."

"I'm not doing it for fun," said Jonas crossly. "I'm doing it to help my client, Mrs. Williams."

Claire said, "Oh, yeah?" But being a perfect secretary, she said it to herself.

"He'll come," said Sam.

"How did you persuade him?"

"No persuasion needed. When I mentioned your name, he seemed quite keen on the idea. He's got to shut down the train and get something to eat. He reckons he'll be here about ten."

"Splendid."

"Matter of fact, I got the idea it suited him better to come after dark. Someone seems to have thrown a scare into him. I told him you'd leave the side door open—the one on the alley. He could slip in that way without showing himself in the street at all. He seemed to like the idea."

Jonas took his evening meal at the South Wind Restaurant. When he had finished, Landless came and sat at his table. He said, "Does the fact that the police have let Aylett go mean they think he's in the clear?"

"It only means they haven't got enough evidence yet to charge him with anything."

"Seems the only result of this whole thing is to make the Shackleton ghost train the biggest attraction on the south coast. They'll be running coaches from Seaford and Newhaven next."

"So I've heard," said Jonas shortly. He didn't want to talk about it.

It was nearly eleven o'clock before Aylett arrived. Jonas had been

devoting some thought to how he was going to open what was bound to be a tricky conversation. Aylett saved him the trouble.

He said, "As soon as Sam mentioned your name, Mr. Pickett, I thought that's just what I want. I want a good solicitor."

Jonas stared at him.

"They've let me go. Just for now. But they'll have me back, I know they will. They'll keep on and on at me, trying to make me say—I mean, trying to make me say something different to what I have said. Next time I go I want you to come with me. That's the law, isn't it? I'm entitled to have a solicitor with me."

Jonas had got his breath back. He said, "There's one thing you've got to understand. No solicitor can act for a client unless he tells him the truth."

"But that's what I have done, Mr. Pickett. I've told the police twenty times. I knew nothing about what happened to Mr. Williams. Nothing at all. I didn't get there that afternoon until just before the arcade opened up. There was a lot of kids waiting already. All I had to do was switch on the effects and start the train. Honest."

The only illumination in the room was the big green-shaded table lamp. Into the bright circle of light it threw on the desk, Jonas silently placed a photograph. It had been taken at an angle to the main entrance of the arcade and some distance from it. It showed Aylett smiling and holding the gate open for Afyn Williams. Both of them were side-faced to the camera and there was no disputing their identities.

"I've been told by three experts," said Jonas, "that they can time a photograph like this from the angle of the sun. Sometime between noon and half past twelve is the consensus of their opinion." He said this slowly, in order to give Aylett time to collect his wits and start lying.

"Yes, of course," he said. "That would have been—let me see—about a week ago. Maybe a little more. Mr. Williams came to see me about not letting children onto the train without an adult in charge. That was one of his fads, you see."

Jonas said, "I don't think you've examined the photograph quite carefully enough. Look at that placard on the wall of the arcade. You can only see the right-hand half of it. But it's quite clear, isn't it? Jokes and Jollities. That's one of the posters announcing this season's pierrot show. It was put up last Friday evening."

There was a long silence, broken finally by Jonas. He said, "When this matter comes to court, as it will, this photograph will be ex-

hibited. The manager of the pierrots will give evidence and so will the photographer. There is no doubt at all—" Jonas's words were falling like stones into a pool of silence—"that this photograph was taken around noon last Saturday. Two hours before Williams was found dead."

Aylett said, "What—" and didn't seem to know how to go on. Then he said, "What can I say?"

"You can tell the truth," said Jonas. "And then I'll see what I can do to get you out of the mess you've got yourself into."

Aylett's resistance broke suddenly and completely. The words came tumbling out. "It was Mr. Fredericks. He made me do it. He owns a lot of the concessions on the pier. The ghost train is one of them. If I didn't do what he said, I was out of my job, see? And I owed him money already. And he said he'd put Louie's men onto me to collect it. Oh, God!"

So both my guesses were right, thought Jonas. He said, "Go on. And talk slowly because I'm going to write it down and you're going to sign it."

"Wrong on both counts," said a voice from the darkness near the inner door. Two creatures had come into the room. A lion and a bear. They must have come in by the side door in the alley. They had slipped into the room with all the stealth and cunning of wild animals.

The lion padded across, swept books and papers off the desk, and perched on the space he had cleared. Jonas could see that the mask was well made, fitting 'round the neck with a stockingette collar. Dark eyes gleamed at him through the slits. The fear had backed Aylett into a corner. He had a husky midlander's voice. A Merseysider, Jonas guessed. "Wassall this, Cyril?" he said. "Consulting the law. You don't want a lawyer. What you want is a nurse, to smack your bottom when you have naughty thoughts." As he said this, he brought one arm across and caught Aylett a swipe on one side of the head which slammed him against the wall. As Aylett threw up his hands to guard his face, the bear kicked him in the stomach. Aylett folded forward onto his knees, retching.

Jonas half rose in his chair. The lion said, "Siddown, granpa. Behave yourself and doan get ideas." He grabbed the telephone, jerked it off its cord, and slammed the instrument back onto the desk.

The bear was standing over Aylett. He had grabbed his hair in one hand and bent his head back so that Aylett was forced to look

up at him. He said, "Did my ears deceive me, Cyril, or did I hear you say something about making a statement? You wouldn't do a thing like that, would you?"

Aylett managed to shake his head.

"That's what I thought. Because you know what happens to people who talk out of turn, don't you?" When Aylett said nothing, he slapped him across the face. There were rings on two of his fingers and they tore long gashes in Aylett's cheek.

"Stop it," said Jonas.

The bear swung round on him. He said, "That's a funny thing to say, isn't it, Leo?"

"Very funny," said the lion.

"He's telling us to stop it, when we haven't even started. When we've finished with Cyril, we'll think up something special for you. Teach you to keep your nose out of other people's business."

The overhead light came on. Sam Coneybear was standing in the doorway. He said, "What's this? Circus time?"

It was clear that the bear recognized him. He said, "You keep out of this," but a lot of the confidence had gone out of his voice.

"That's no way to talk to an old friend," said Sam. "Colley, isn't it? I thought it was. Used to be a bit of a boxer in your youth, I seem to remember. Let's see some style." He formed up to the bear as though he was facing him in the ring, then lashed out with his right foot, catching him on the knee. Jonas heard the kneecap crack. The bear let out a scream, went down on the floor, and lay there nursing his knee and cursing.

Sam took no more notice of him. He turned his attention to the lion, who had removed himself from the corner of the desk and was standing beside it, clearly uncertain what to do next.

"You a boxer, too?" said Sam. "Or just a fighter?" He sidled up to him, presenting his left shoulder. The lion lashed out with one foot. Sam stepped aside, caught the lion's foot in both hands, and twisted it. The lion managed to grab the desk with one hand and started to stop. He had his back to Jonas, who picked up the telephone and brought it down hard on his head. The lion went down without a sound.

"Really, Mr. Pickett," said Sam. "That's no way to treat Post Office property."

Jonas said, "Thank you, Sam." He was surprised to find he could speak at all. "You'd better get the police. Use the phone in Claire's room."

"I rang 'em before I came in," said Sam. "I think that's them coming now."

"I take it," said Queen, "that you'll be preferring charges."

"Certainly. And in case there's any doubt about who said what, I might mention that I already had the recorder switched on to get Aylett's statement. The whole scene's on tape."

"The court should enjoy it," said Queen grimly. He turned to Aylett. "Do I gather you've got something to tell us? If so, go ahead. You've got your lawyer here."

Aylett looked at Jonas, who said, "The whole story. It's your only chance."

When Aylett had finished, Queen said, "You'd better get that face of yours attended to. The car will take you 'round to the station. We'll have the whole thing typed out and you can sign it."

When they were alone, he said, "Nice work, squire. Did you know those beauties would come after him?"

Jonas said, "No. That was luck." He added, "Shake the tree and you'll find that all the fruit will fall off."

It was three months later before Jonas had the chance to spend another morning on the pier. It had been a busy three months, but satisfactory. As soon as Fredericks had seen all the guns pointing at him, he had lost no time in involving Claude Schofield, who had turned on Louie the Nose. It had been a reign of terror in reverse, thought Jonas, everyone trying to shift the blame on others and only involving themselves more deeply.

At Lewes Assizes, sentences had been dealt out by Mr. Justice Roche to all concerned that had satisfied even Chief Superintendent Whaley. Aylett, who had been given an indemnity, was the main witness for the Crown. Defense counsel had given him a shellacking, but there was no shaking his story.

Very satisfactory. Even Whaley had been moved to say that he thought Mr. Pickett had done a public service. A temporary truce, thought Jonas.

It was near the end of the season and the pier was emptier. He walked back to the arcade, purchased a fivepenny disc from the attendant, and went over to the corner where the old slot machines stood.

"Real works of art, they are," said the attendant. "They don't make 'em like this any more. They ought to be in a museum, really."

Jonas inserted the disc. The tricoteuses waved their needles, the aristocrat bowed his head, the blade of the guillotine descended. The blade was blunt, but repeated applications must have weakened the aristocrat's neck and on this occasion his head fell right off and rolled amongst the old ladies.

"End of the Reign of Terror," said Jonas.

"Not a bit of it," said the attendant. "It's happened before. We sew his head on again."

This seemed to Jonas so funny somehow that he started to laugh.

As though to reprove his levity, his radio-pager gave three decisive bleeps.



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by MARK GRENIER

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Who, from spite, robbed his own brother's store,
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And declared, "Now I've evened the score."

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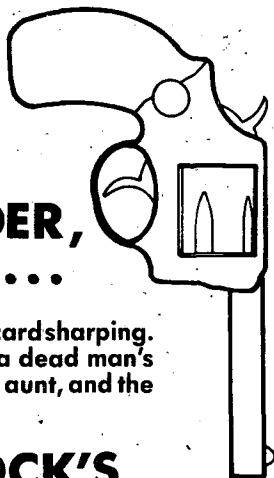
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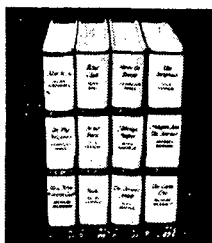
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WIFE'S LOT

by ADELAIDE SIMMONS

I married a man and enriched him.
A pretty young thing then bewitched him.
When the scandal got 'round
I dug a hole in the ground
And that is the way that I ditched him.

© 1985 by Adelaide Simmons.

POINT TAKEN

by JOSEPH KEPPEL

He should have known
No one escapes,
But still he fled the joint.
And fell upon
The knife he stole—
We're sure he got the point.

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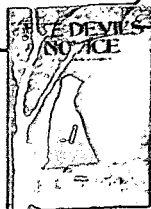
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by MARJORY FARRINGTON

Wealthy Gloria dwelt in euphoria,
For Manuel often said, "I adorrre ya."
Still, he poisoned her tea,
Then said slyly to me,
"Money lasts but 'sic transit Gloria.'"

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You're invited to the trial.



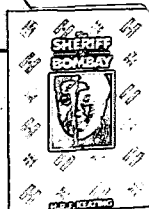
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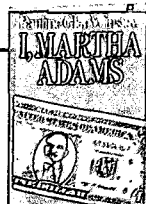
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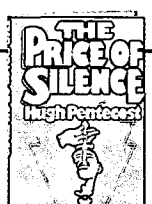
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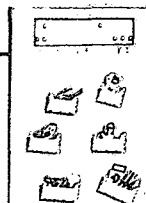
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